

Haxaires

by
cgnastrand

Dyjan Publishing.

Copyright © 2022 by cгнаstrand. Some rights reserved. Parts of this book may be used without permission of the author. The reader does not need to contact the author to be given the right to use portions of this book, however, outright plagiarism of the work in its entirety is embarrassing; the reader can do better. If the reader wishes to expand or add to any portion of the work that is their right and is theirs if they wish to use it.

All names, characters, and incidents portrayed are fictitious. No identification with actual persons, (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products are intended or should be inferred.

GUIDEPOSTS

“Malu mlu uolia,” he said. His children answered back the same. Brojmen glanced at the four of them, the father and his three children, and turned down from the villa where they sat, sipping the scarlet wine that had sprung up from the mountainside.

He spoke softly then, to the others.

“We have to stop this,” the android said.

The colonists arrived fifty days before on the planet Tselyh, which Mr. Anderson dubbed Mars II. The colonists numbered close to a thousand, with half as many androids.

The androids’ role was to monitor the colonists in case anything unusual happened.

There was precedent in this. On Thurratus Prime, two thousand colonists had slowly succumbed to the sea and the rocky isles and the jet-blue-black waters until a year later when the second ship arrived no colonists were left.

However, in the waters were found porpoiselike creatures. They swam in the lower depths, their grey-dark bodies alien, their eyes dulled but their fingered hands, webbed but still discernibly human, told the second colonists all they needed to know.

They left and never returned.

Out of a hundred colony ships less than half survived. Or rather half the colonists survived as human. At Corscadeum the plateaus and desert seemed to go on forever. Where had the colonists gone? No trace of them was found, but when the second colonists noticed the large scorpions who burrowed upward through the soft sand, massive black-bodied creatures each wearing a human face, it became clear the world was unsafe.

Abiding in that knowledge the second ship departed and the world was quarantined.

So, after watching humans grow feathers and wings, swim with gilled-soaked throats, and perch on mountainsides as their skins hardened into glass or diamond, the rule was made that colonists never go anywhere without androids by their sides.

And now *they* had to save the colonists on Tselyh.

At first, the changes were unnoticeable. The colonists had built a small settlement in the depression of a sandy valley. Cutting through the valley was a river or canal, something seemingly made rather than naturally formed.

The waterway was too smooth, too perfect. It cut the valley in half and broached outward into a perfect spider-web design, crossing into other valleys and plains perfectly. The entire world was crossed by such rivers. But no beings could be found.

Mr. Anderson was Brojmen's responsibility. At first, the father of three had been content with the job of discovering the nature of the first builders. He had ventured upward into the mountains and the hills and there amid the great villas hollowed out of centuries had tried to understand who came before.

Standing by his side the android watched the man work. He was an oddly rotund figure, large and imposing, and the desert below seemed parched and hungry. He even had a name for it. "The acquisitive dragon," he said, as he continued to probe at the hieroglyphs etched along strangely metallic books.

And through it all Brojmen watched and waited. The android offered help but mostly spoke of one topic. Of Earth.

The longer the desert lurked below, the longer Brojmen talked of green hills and fields and the smell of concrete and cement, of concrete rivers and snaking rivers of streets, of towers and oceans and the fish and the jungles, and everything human the android could think of. Brojmen was the man's anchor to a place the man would not see again.

And the day ended and the day began and the pair continued in their studies.

The changes were unnoticed at first. Anderson translated the hieroglyphs and the other colonists, Mr. Nakasuma, Ms. Onica Pride, and the old man Picksirign, started to talk in the night of what had been found.

“Ha’qadrieus,” he said, speaking to them in the cool of their homes. The androids clustered outside speaking quietly among themselves. “The villa was called Ha’qadrieus. They were like us, but, well, they had wings,” he described the insectlike wings they had as dragonflies might wear, “and jewel-encrusted eyes. Thin-bodied things.”

“What happened to them?” his son Jim asked.

“I’m not sure. The records slowed down half a million years ago and the cities just stopped.” He idly itched his back. No one noticed it. “I have a few theories but that’s all. Brojmen!” he called. The silver-bodied android entered the room.

“Yes,” Brojmen said.

“Sing us a song.”

“Of what type?”

“Of Earth,” he gazed uneasily out the window to the dark villa on the hill, “something to do with Earth.”

And the android began to sing of a pair of lovers, of jealousy and betrayal, of the two children slaughtered for their ignorance. Not all things of Earth were good after all. Forgetting that could make one forget from where they came.

It had been five days since the colonists arrived. No gills formed, and no skin hardened into glass or stone. The android scanned its eyes of sapphire against the flesh of the colonists and while he did the others, each outside a home, watched with unceasing eyes, noticing every movement and every gesture.

There seemed no change. Had the android the thoughts of a man it would be pleased. But Brojmen was not a man. And the

machine had a task before it, before him. Brojmen finished his songs, and without being asked left the room. And through it all a small itching continued on Anderson's back.

Another day and the pair worked. Down in the valley, Brojmen listened to its brethren. Some seemed masculine, some feminine. Some even spent their time now and then indulging their organic counterparts in all manner of games.

At the moment Xujundreia was having sex with Raul Por. Idly Brojmen glanced at each thrust seen through her sapphire eyes, noticing the touch of warm skin against its own. Raul was little more than a young man and his parents were beyond working in the sandy fields.

For what the android couldn't say.

Brojmen and Xujundreia communed a moment. It was not unusual for humans to take such an interest they both noted. The river careened by and Brojmen noted that Anderson had said something about the word river being translated as *tralsna*.

Very interesting, Brojmen said. Simultaneously Raul finished, his youthful frame exhausted, hanging onto her as she peered up at the sky a moment, then the river to her left. Was his heart irregular? Brojmen asked. No, it seemed fine.

Good, Brojmen replied, then idly checked the others.

At one end of the valley, the Colonel was pretending to duel. Aluroch watched as silvery skin was pierced by a saber. The old man delighted himself in the duel as the mouth of the river screamed and the mountains were behind him.

"Hurt?" he asked, his old military uniform torn and threadbare.

"Utterly fine," Aluroch said as he thrust his sword upright and cut along the Colonel's face until his left side dripped with blood. A roar, partly of rage, partly of pleasure issued from the old man's lips and he duelled with the machine, blue blood

suddenly staining the scarlet ground.

No trouble? No, none. Damage fixable? His or mine? Yours. Fixable. How long can he continue? He fought at Ravensholmes. He will not quit for hours. Good, continue.

“Ah, another word.”

What word is that? Brojmen asked.

Their word for war, he said, glancing up.

The change, when it came, came fast. Day 10 the colonists seemed fine. True they were changing slightly but they were tanning. DNA seemed right and the bodies seemed good. By day 20 Raul showed no interest in sex. There were two hundred women and half as many female androids, (and if he were bisexual doubled that many potential sexual partners,) but he was showing a definite lack of interest. His parents, Martha and John also seemed to be losing something now.

Before they had spent their days in the fields excavating, now they'd begun to focus upward to the villas. They'd migrated to see what the hollowed-out villas were like. This itself was not so strange. However, they left their son behind. They were usually oblivious. They had never been neglectful.

Anderson's young children were changing too. Jim, Sarah, and Paul were starting to talk using the words their father gave them. Not so unusual. The words passed easily from tongue to tongue. But Sarah, the youngest started to mention something in her dreams. She was flying. Again, for a six-year-old hardly unusual. But the wings she described . . . then day 30 hit.

But now the androids were growing, if not concerned, then aware something was wrong.

The Colonel mentioned some weapon that he seemed familiar with, a weapon that the builders had used to fight their ancient wars. He talked about the barbed hooks like golden blades of grass twisted and spun. He wanted it, he said, he hungered for

it, a weapon he did not know existed thirty days before.

Raul spent his time along the sand by the river. His skin darkened slowly and his eyes glazed over. Cats which had been introduced among the colonists suddenly disappeared one day. Brojmen found them; they had grown wings and had sailed northward, dying as they fell Icaruslike into the valley beyond. They had been trying to escape their transformation, pale and bronzed into bones along the shores of a farther river.

But they could not escape themselves.

And there were still twenty days to go.

At first, the androids had simply tried to amass the colonists. Mr. Anderson had plans to stop them. Brojmen noticed his friend was now slenderer, his massive rolls of flesh dissolving like sugar in a stream.

He was thinning rapidly. They all were. But, despite, or because of this, they were also getting much stronger. At first, the androids had simply tried to contain the colonists in their homes but when Mr. Ouytsoide broke O'Corniea's arm, when the old man suddenly had the strength to snap steel like rotted wood the androids regrouped to consider what else to do.

And the longer they waited the more colonists vanished to the villas above.

They could have contacted a second ship. But to Brojmen's consternation, the communication relay at the centre of the village had been destroyed. There was still the ship itself of course. It hung in the sky like a black beacon, a monolithic giant suspended in the air. It could be contacted easily and from there, other ships could be contacted.

Mr. Anderson was simply delaying the inevitable.

Except. When Brojmen was high above, having gained access to the ship he tried to contact someone else, anyone. But no words came. The machinery worked, and the relay worked. But

the ship could not pierce the barrier of the world.

Leave then? Brojmen stood upon the command bridge gazing at the world below, at the checkerboard pattern of water and earth, of mountains ringing about in an endless mosaic. The android had climbed to the ship easily, a pathway of solid light allowing the android entrance, but they couldn't leave.

For the same mosaic below was also above.

Gazing up there was the same pattern. The same rivers, the same mountains. He even stood outside upon the outer skin and gazing upward, (he believed it was above,) stood the mirror image of the world below. He then walked round to the underside, not even fearful of falling off. But he didn't fall, and below him, (he believed it was below,) stood the same ground as above.

The path of light then? Brojmen summoned it and it came, going in two directions, and all the time below or above the androids from both reflected worlds summoned him. He took the path he believed was above and he stood where he had stood before.

He relayed all this to the others. They saw as he saw. It was impossible. Perhaps the world was changing them. Perhaps it simply didn't want anyone to leave.

What are we going to do? Xujundreia asked

Brojmen had no answer yet.

Day 50 and the village was deserted. High in the villas the people were now almost utterly transformed. Mr. Anderson's back was bursting with the seeds of wings.

His children now fluently spoke the language of the lost people who had dwelled before.

They had streamed upward to these palisades and crevices, but all too soon they would fly. Of that Brojmen had no doubt. And when they did nothing human of them would be left.

"Malu mlu uolia," he said. And his children answered him

back. He no longer remembered his former name nor did any of his children. Brojmen stood in the village below and knew they did not have much time left.

We cannot leave, O'Corniea said. His arm had not yet been healed. And we cannot let this continue. They have days left.

Should we let them transform? Xujundreia asked.

Brojmen turned to her then in the conference before the ruined communications relay. We cannot stop it. We will survive as we are. A ship will arrive sooner or later. We have tried to act as guideposts and cannot. What is done cannot be undone.

No, Brojmen said simply. All eyes turned to him. I will not let them perish.

We cannot change them back, she replied.

We can change ourselves though, he said.

And so, they made their plans

Their word for war was *xuelthreia*. It was perhaps the final word ever said. Down in the valley the machines prepared for battle. First, they gained wings before the humans did. From the ship, they brought what they needed and built wings. Then they changed their forms. They made their bodies slender like those of the first ones.

Their eyes they made jewel-encrusted, their fingers slender and fewer than before as each became aware of the language the old ones had. Then they sped upward to the sky, hundreds of beings who had not been seen here in half a million years.

They swarmed as a great wave wearing a strange colour upon their bodies between bronze and some other unknowable shade. The ones in the villas turned cool strange eyes, saw beings they imagined themselves to be as they raced through and attacked.

Mr. Anderson clutched at his children as Brojmen was there and seemed with a gesture to slaughter them. Blood issued from wounds and eyes watered in pain as old and young, women

and men the androids seemed to kill.

Then their bodies were dragged away up into the sky where they were left in burial aboard the ship. Left as if to die. Only then did the androids return to the ground and begin their second metamorphosis.

Mr. Anderson stared at the hieroglyphs for a time.

His children, Sarah, Jim, and Paul were there with him.

Down in the valley, the Colonel was dueling with Raul while his parents were off having sex in a nearby barn.

"This word," Mr. Anderson said, "what does it mean?"

"It means family," Sarah said.

"That's right. And family's very important to us, isn't it?"

"Very important Dad," Jim said. Of course, only half the colonists were here. Half a thousand. They didn't mind. Mr. Anderson continued his studies while the planet washed over him, trying to change the man. But it couldn't. Because the man simply didn't exist.

Far overhead Mr. Anderson slumbered and shuffled in his sleep. Aboard the ship, he was as a dead man, and the planet took no notice of him. But down below Mr. Anderson was working, his rotund body impressive and unchanging. And whatever the planet tried simply could not change the man.

Brojmen brushed at a few more hieroglyphs while Xujundreia gazed up at him from her small frame. Neither one knew how long they'd have to keep up the masquerade, how many years before the world tired of them and let them escape. But they were patient. They would continue and the colony would survive as long as needed. Their orders were to keep humanity as human as possible. Nowhere did it say that the humans had to start out that way.

Mr. Anderson kept on digging and began to sing a song of Earth.

THE MITES

I have dreams. In my dreams, I am sitting in a room and there is a woman across from me. She has scars along her stomach and wears rounded dark glasses, her darker skin almost tanned, she is looking at me and I think I love her. The dream ends.

The room is always the same or perhaps it differs but I don't know because the logic of the dream is such that I imagine the rounded grey table, and the grey walls as being unchanging when perhaps they were not always grey.

Or we were not always in a room.

But the dream ends and afterward, I awaken into the presence of them and after that, I try to forget the woman or the dream.

It isn't a city as I could describe. More a series of interconnecting pathways degrading downward or ascending as if the whole world were a sphere and we wandered from corner to corner of it, (if such a thing were possible,) or end to end, but the lit rooms, galleries, great passageways seem to go on forever and we are alone in our thoughts.

I could describe them I suppose. The *multitude*. They are the great wellspring of another intelligence, as unique, as powerful, and as driven as our own. Their bodies seem violet fading into dark purple and you expect it is skin you're looking at, but isn't. It is armour made of chitin, and though at first glance they seem human they are something else.

They have legs and arms but along their sides are smaller appendages and their bright yellow eyes are three times larger than a man's and they seem almost jewellike when they seem to smile. But they don't have mouths. There's a blank space where a mouth would be and so communication depends entirely upon recognizing the subtle alterations of their jewellike eyes for each

shimmer indicates a thought, each movement of their heads a sentence.

So yes, though we share the space, though I walk among them, naked as they are, though I eat at their communal areas I can no more directly speak to them than if I were on the other side of the world. And they cannot directly communicate with me. At rare times one of them will look to me and with my translator at hand, embedded in my palm, they will ask some questions, and Rysanaef will comment back. And the question is usually the same, and the answer is likewise.

“What is she? What type of creature is she?”

“It is not a creature. It is a man.”

But the word, the last word they can’t translate among themselves so even though I know and she knows the word to an extent the asker does not and since communication requires a mutual understanding usually with mild bewilderment the asker wanders on.

Rysanaef will then turn to me and with her jewel-yellowed eyes smile as if to say, “What else could I say?”

I think sometimes I dream about Rysanaef, sometimes the dark features turn a shade of violet, sometimes the soft sinews of her mouth dissolve into a blank canvas and her eyes widen until a hexagonal pattern overshadows her sight.

But I want to keep pace with the woman I imagine, and not Rysanaef. I try to twist the mouth back into existence, try to shrink down the eyes, but can’t.

Of course, it’s not a city we’re travelling in, nor a world, but a ship. They sent a colony ship from their space and I was sent to rendezvous with it. Because we’re allies. Because we are close friends. Because communication with them was achieved sixty years ago and so we’ve learned everything about them. Except. Like I said communication requires a mutual understanding.

Some words, two words, eluded them. Rysanaef learned those words but I had spoken with her for months before this, the electrical impulses from her thoughts arranged in a nice neat explanation just as my thoughts were arranged for her benefit.

So, we talked. We walked from our respective spheres of influence and when I arrived at the outer edge of the ship she was there. A few others as well but I was her responsibility. And that created the confusion of the first word.

Man.

I tried for many weeks to explain the concept to her. Gender, its role, how gender was divided, how we humans used gender divisions in our lives, all this I had to explain with limited success. At first.

Yes, it took time, and the longer I stayed the deeper grew the dreams. She in turn tried to explain to the others but the shift in perspective I had wanted did not happen easily. Mind you they were never unkind during this period; I was merely sick, an enigma, or both.

In all the discussions we had used gender terms but they had simply not understood. How could I explain the colour kemite to you if you'd never seen it before, even if I described it perfectly? One's own frame of reference is all one ever has when it comes to understanding the universe and if the frame of reference is too confined one is most assuredly not aware of it.

The other word, the second word, made me aware of the situation. The word was sex. They lacked a concept of sex. Reproduction they understood but the physical act of sex eluded them. It was the difference between describing an eye and describing sight; they knew about reproduction and had great experience with it. But sex? The concept as I described it simply did not exist.

At first, I assumed this meant they reproduced asexually. Perhaps they budded or divided in half or cloned themselves like

certain lizards on Earth. But then I saw. I saw how they reproduced. And the dreams have gotten worse since then.

She is going today. She is going from the long corridors, the endless spaces, the communal living areas where they are stacked together like cordwood, occasionally having small flashes of brilliance shining in the dark, and she is going to the wombs of the ship, to give birth.

I have to go with her. Her friends, those she knows are going, beings whose names I don't know, can't know. Rysanaef is just my name for her. Even the name of their race, when they speak, is just my closest approximation of a nonexistent tongue.

The room is grey and there is a round grey table and her eyes are sparkling with expectation. There are six of us and we, I, have been told what to do. And I don't scream, I don't shake, I don't panic or vomit like last time. I breathe, slowly, rhythmically, and I wait. Rysanaef was born exactly two hundred days ago. That's how long it takes to reach maturity for her young.

My last thought is the dream and whether some analyst would take stock of it as either repression or suppression or some glimpsed idealized desire for home but none of that matters now.

She begins to shudder in pain.

I never described their abdomens really. They are clear violet and seemingly hard like the rest of their bodies but the armour is poorest there. This is why. The other five and I stand about her as my friend shudders, at first in ecstasy and then in agonizing pain as cracks form along her abdomen.

Then small holes.

And I see a small yellow eye peering out, the vague glance of some innocent being as Rysanaef is devoured from within, as her own children consume portions of her flesh, small miniature copies of her burrowing out, and I, we, reach in, collecting them before they turn on each other and start ripping off one another's

limbs.

And afterward there in the pit of her broken body is a small wiggling frame, sputtering, smaller than the others, yellow eyes almost nonexistent, arms broken off, (nourishment for the young,) and it whimpers twice then dies. No. Not *it*. Before *he* died, *he* had impregnated his sisters in the womb, as his ancestors had done for uncounted millions of years, their entire lives spent in this act before looking up out of the broken recesses of their mothers from a womb which was their entire universe.

And I am holding this small being in my hands, squirming, watching as her mouth slowly seals shut, watching as the last sounds she ever utters are some mewling infant cries for warmth. And then she never speaks again as the mouth dissolves away and her first and last meal is of her own flesh. Her own family.

And I won't turn and look away and I won't scream and I won't panic or vomit. I carefully place her in the arms of one of the others, I breathe, and I imagine for a moment the woman from my dreams, as I leave the room but not before I imagine one of the infants I have seen, might remember me. Perhaps in two hundred days, I can explain those missing words to her. I wonder what words they will teach us when their ship approaches Earth.

THE AZALLS

She's being fog again. She's letting herself curl about the walls of our home, slide upward rhythmically as if to impress me and then the greying form of herself strolls down the brown wallpaper, coalesces to a pool on the floor and suddenly she is a woman again, naked, smiling at me. I am not smiling back at her.

She brushes her brown hair against me as she passes, each strand trying to curl about my cheek but I'm not impressed this week. I watch her naked thighs as she climbs the stairs and hear the sound of water pouring. She's going to shower now. Good.

I walk over to my favourite chair but not before pricking it with a needle, the soft pads so easily replaced by someone else, then take up my seat and read.

Of course, the needle, even the book in my hand, the history of the Hartshorn War could likewise be one of them. But it hardly matters. I flip the pages idly as the water upstairs continues to pour and idly for a moment imagine each drop becomes one of them.

Outside the city is breathing. This is not an idle metaphor. Some roads are them, some buildings they have become and the pigeons flying in the park and each tree, each blade of grass, each book hidden away, each coin, could all potentially be them.

Sometimes they remain in their current hidden forms for weeks, in some rare cases years. A coin used and passed along the currency with the rest, ever watchful lest some enemy soldier has acquired them.

Several paintings are them. I have personally seen some abstract jotting of lines of blue and green suddenly peer outward, a human head appears, watches me a moment, and then just as effortlessly dissolves, sliding away, disappearing.

Twice I have worn old coats brown and frayed which

suddenly turned into naked women who peered about along the fine streets in the summertime, both ways, one with red hair, the other a brunette, just looking about, naked breasts and thighs and eyes and they stretched then turned back into my coat. I wasn't even really that surprised.

And then there is my sister.

Allow me to explain.

There was a war. Our city of Fulhaym was at war with the city of Harston. We lived upon a rather large plain, ours located by the river Naclyde, theirs to the north by the river Naclyd.

Why we fought I don't know.

The Hartshorn War, as it became known, started as a minor skirmish then each side decided to truly cut loose. Cybernetic implants in our soldiers to increase strength, the use of mechanical armour to protect against artillery.

But then someone decided to use the Azalls.

I have a sister who has the ability to change her shape you see. When we were younger and smaller in the park she'd become the sandbox, two onyx stones for eyes, hair turned into the wooden frame.

At home she'd dissolve into the floors, the walls, the ceiling, or fly upward, flesh turned to pages mimicking a book I liked. She could mimic human form as well, turn into copies of my mother and father and myself. Somewhat rare phenomenon but not unheard of. So, after the soldiers went forth someone decided the Azalls too were going to war.

Now you have to wonder why we didn't use them first, why having these individuals in our midst they weren't our first choice. The enemy didn't have them. Azalls like I said were somewhat rare and our enemies had a decidedly less open society than ours. After the war we found mass graves; they killed every child who was Azall.

Thing is Azalls are usually harmless. It comes with the mentality they have. If you can become anything, are you going to be a monster, a saint, or are you just going to relax, go with the flow of things, and blend in?

See if an Azall lives in a small room they become the room. They mimic the chairs and the table, they enlarge, shrink, but whatever is in the room they are and whatever is not in the room they are not.

So, what happens when an Azall is in a room of weapons, or dead bodies or has to interrogate someone? Why they become the weapons, they become the corpses, they become the enemy for a moment and then they have to go on because they have to fight.

Themselves sometimes.

I was stationed defending the borders. We had built a wall about the city, a weak inferior copy of diamond glass. The plain beyond was littered with craters and barbed wire; we even started using hidden spikes in the ground. Punji sticks I think they were called centuries before.

Far away I saw our enemies. The city of Harston was a dull, almost black industrial complex so far from us. The thing is the plain was utterly smooth and the valley was bordered on each side by low rolling hills of green, and due to the utterly clear air and unobstructed view we could see the city as a massive dot with our naked eyes and with surveillance could see almost every building clearly.

I didn't see the blast first. I felt it. I felt the hot air for a moment, tasted something like copper and then the blast could be seen. We were stationed there against the wall, our own city half-ruined, the gutted remnants of homes left open like maggot-coated sores and then our enemies were gone. They were no more.

And that was that.

Received a letter after the war. Handwritten. Her letter, herself in a way. She had been ordered to infiltrate the enemy city. For all their talk of racial superiority, the Harstonians had never realized how lethal the Azalls were.

A coordinated effort had been made. Several Azalls working together took over key industries while my sister, my lovely little sister became their leader after having killed the original man.

And everything worked.

At the perfect moment, they sabotaged everything. One destroyed their factories, another provided faulty intelligence leading the last survivors into a doomed trap, and my sister, my little sister who committed suicide before an audience of thousands, thus demoralizing the enemy at just the right second as she slipped away when the firestorm hit.

I don't like to think about that.

But it wasn't enough you see.

Like I said Azalls become their environment. We found her, found her half-dead in No Man's Land. She'd turned into a bird and flown off, crashed and cratered and broken to the ground. A small black bird calling her brother's name.

We carefully cradled her up and took her home again as the black burning ruins of the city beyond echoed far away like a wraith, crying for its son.

It took her months of slow healing, becoming a hospital bed, a sheet, the kind doctor and his kind sad eyes, and her loving brother who had watched a city burn because of what we had made of her. Because of what I had made of her, begging her to help with the war, scornful of all those times she'd feared what might happen if she had to become something she was not.

And when she came out of it, still fragmented, still terrified to have conceived of all those lives lost she imagined herself still fighting the war. She mistook Fulhaym for Harston.

She mistook me for an enemy soldier. But not just her though. Several hundred Azalls upon returning home believed the war was still being waged and that they still had enemies to kill. But they'd have to spy on us first. To make certain of how dangerous we are.

So rather than dissuade them we are slowly letting them continue to believe as they believe. Of course, the environment means so much that the longer they spend among us, the longer the city becomes their city again the sooner they slip back into the people they were before.

Sometimes she even remembers my name, forgets her post, remembers this is our parents' home and goes upstairs to get ready, to prepare herself for the day. Like any normal person would.

But other times she's fog trying to spy on me and twice now she's tried to kill me. One time she wrapped those strands of hair about my throat and one time she poured herself down my throat to suffocate me.

Thankfully not all Azall suffered so. So now they are with us always, watchers who step in, a book becoming the only thin barrier between a delusional soldier and a member of their own family, prying herself off of me as she screams and cries to let her do her job and finish the leader.

I wish she could finish and be done with this finally. I'm so sorry for what I've done.

And I rise up from my chair and go to the door leading to the outside, listening to the sound of the running water, watching as a nearby wall slithers upward, small scales like fingers rippling up the stairs to where she is, ever ready in case she tries to end herself. Again.

I sigh and reach for my coat hanging on the coat rack by the door then check myself, reach for a second one just in case, and I go out into this wounded world again.

THE MOORS

"Have you seen them then?" he asks me.

Maurya O'Camlyrn is sitting in the barn whittling 'pon a piece of driftwood from the shores of Strathmore, turning it into a figure I can't quite fathom yet.

I nod.

I sit on a pile of wood meant for the winter warmth, meant to be charred and used up and burnt to keep the little hut by the edge of the moors livable when all the world is white in a shade of white.

He nods. His straggly beard has blossomed into grey, the overalls, the pipe in his mouth, his hands rough and tanned between deep brown and black, the old sign of fingers rotted thru in the cold. But the man struggled in that winter, his fingers didn't fall off, (though they tried,) and now here he is, his pale blue eyes on the figure he's whittling and here I am a stranger knit together into the lives of the village only because I've seen them.

"And what were they doing this time?" he asks.

"They were out on the moors dancing together. Girl had a black dress swaying, boy wore white, looked like a shirt and a hat, straw-coloured."

"Ay, that's them alright. That's the pair."

He looks up at me, indicating he wants me to go on.

"Well, they were dancing and swaying like to music and they spotted me and the girl flashed her teeth, white, sharp, sharklike teeth, eyes totally black, and the boy, saw his eyes," shuddered, "white, terribly white, and they ran to me. Crossed the grass and the moors and I fled and I turned back in time to see them stop, heard the howl," I shudder again, "then they wandered on."

"Like wolves or jackals do when they can't claim a kill."

He focuses his pale eyes on the tanned driftwood, smokes his pipe

and looks back at me. "If you had stepped any closer you wouldn't be here boy."

"Heard that. Heard the moors are theirs, their ownership of it."

"Oh, no, no, no, they don't own the moors. The moors own *them*."

And this is the story he told.

"Brother and sister they were. Halghuis family. Lived on the very edge of the moorland. If they went any farther in the threat of bog swallowing them whole. Ciaryen was the father, never met him but heard good things. Hard worker, good drinker when he came to the pub, fancied a smoke now and 'gain.

"Met his wife. Pyamra. Small little thing, barely out of her twenties. Like summer old folks said." He laughed. "'Course I'm an old one now. Married in the city, came here to the ancestral places of his home. Nice woman. Met her many times when she came to the village, buying things.

"Problem started when they had the children. Three of them. The pair were twins, third was first. Laesure was first born. Bright boy, harmless. Pair second. Cahira the daughter, Fleldau the son. Strange. Even as infants strange.

"Laesure loved the pair, so I've been told. When he was six and they were four it happened."

"It?"

"Pair went walking into the moors and found *it*. The doll. The Dahmund."

I'd never heard the term before. I nodded as if in asking and he nodded, knowing my ignorance, almost winced, and then went on.

"There's Dahmunds and Drahmunds," he said.

"Drahmunds are the protectors, what the old folk call the guardians of the land. Take any shape or form. Trees, stone, river.

Exist to hold back us from them.

"If we go into the moors the Drahmunds stop us. Not in big ways. Subtle. Try to cross by river and the wind picks up, just right, and the boat gets locked on a sand bar. Cross the tree line and the branches swing down, hit you upside the head. Warning like. Drahmund live to keep us out."

"But you said they found a Dahmund."

"Yeah, other-kind. Live to keep things *in*. See the moors aren't just in need of protecting they're in need of guarding against. Old ones claim the Dahmund be the wardens of the moors, be the ones who hold things there so they don't come *here*."

"And the children found a Dahmund?"

"Ay, form of a doll. Ugly little thing, but it was Dahmund a'right. After they got their hands on it the strange thing happened. Laesure almost died when he 'fell' in the river Arne. Ciaryen was almost killed when a horse came out of nowhere to crash into him like the wind against a pane of glass.

"Pyamra died."

He looked down at the figure a moment, sighing. Almost saw a tear in the old man's eye.

"How?" I asked.

"I won't say." He looked up. "But the pair done it. They done it and she was buried, and the boy ran and the father wept to see such scorn, for the pair they never wept, they never cared. The doll mattered, just the doll to them.

"At the ceremony when the body was laid to rest, they howled, they laughed, they mocked, pair of children joyous at her ending. All stared, all watched, they stared, they watched. They challenged. See who could come and defeat them then.

"Priest, Levinuesja, he came first." I nodded. "Outsider, come from some cold land can't pronounce. Thought it was the spirits like he knew, went and performed the old rites, figured

that was the end but he didn't know the Dahmund or the Drahmund-kind so the pair, they went to the church.

"Screamed and died.

"Law summoned Halqueir. He was the warden of the village at the time. Held them under lock and key at his jailhouse. Head," he looked to me, "sliced clean off the bones. No blood. Naw, no blood.

"Then it was up to me."

"You?"

"Ay, me. Wouldn't know to look it but I was a young strapping man once. So, I figure the only way would be to go over them heads of theirs. Went into the moor, to talk see. I spoke to the river, I spoke to the stone, to the tree, to the shadows in the grass. Pleaded my case. Said the evil got into them so they had to draw the evil back home. Then they answered me."

"The trees and the shadows spoke?" I asked.

"Not in words. Seen it," he pointed to his head, "in my mind. Doll wasn't the cause see, no, no, had it backward. Always strange. Daughter seemed to walk on water, son seemed to fly. The Dahmund wasn't just a warden, it was *their* warden, their jailor.

"Something got out of the womb and into the world and whether they were always such or something in the moors latched onto them to ride the whirlwind away I don't know. When they found the Dahmund, their old tormentor, they took it to show it the brave old world they were making.

"I was tasked with bringing them back. So, I did."

"How?" I asked, looking at him in wonder for his pale eyes shone almost silver-bright as he spoke.

"By bringing a Drahmund with me. He rode here," pointing to his temple again, "and possessed like, walked to the old hut. They were there laughing and then I stormed in, took the doll, ran, laughing at them, calling them cowards and fools and

braggarts, begging them to come and kill me.

“They ran. Rather flew. In their haste to torment their jailor, they didn’t notice the moment they passed into the moors. At that moment I was freed and stone and shadow and river strove together, held them fast in chains of themselves and the Dahmund in my hand broke free too, and did . . .,” he paused, then looked up at me in a terror and awe-filled state I’d never seen any man show before, “it was like fire swirling upward into a pillar, like water and thunder and darkness and rain and shadow had flesh and form and dragged and tossed and threw and impaled the pair of them. Ran, never looked back. Can’t look back, to the moors.”

“So, they’ll be there forever then?” I asked.

“Don’t rightly know. Thing is, as punishment the moors turned them, turned them into the one thing they hate above all. Made them Drahmund, protector, guard dog. Now no one needs any other warning not to step upon the moors.”

THE BODY REMEMBERS

Clay Daniels was running for the first time in seven years. Before he had crossed the grassy plains of his home, let the soft green carpet brush against his naked feet, his house behind him, the hill before him there was nothing but the sensation of the run.

Then the cancer, loss of his legs below the knees, part of his lung rotted through. Years spent bedbound, his black hair fading to wisps, his body withered, being tended to by the machines, some designed to appear human, even female, (if he was interested,) waiting and hoping he'd recover.

And then the surgery, recovery of his legs, replacement of damaged lung tissue, (cloned tissue, for both legs and lung,) and then the arduous process of recovery. Months in hospital, his assistant and caregiver by his side, her utterly blue eyes the only real indication of her non-humanity, the doctors marvelling at his progress.

He summed up his attitude simply.

"Never give up one's life."

And now after getting used to the legs, to the lung, his body slowly rebuilt he felt the summer grass flow past him, saw the blue sky, breathed the milk-smooth air and she was at the small cottage of his home, waiting.

Her name was Jagira and had been programmed to service his needs though his needs had consisted, besides feeding and clothing, of listening to his philosophy as he called it. Before the disease had eaten at him Clay Daniels had devoted himself fully to the attainment of an ideal reflected in the choices of his days.

In the beginning, he had been fascinated by wealth. The attainment of things had captivated him. In his twenties he had gone into banking, becoming successful enough to claim the title of millionaire. But this had not been enough for him.

Merely the ownership of things had not satisfied him. So,

in his thirties, he had begun to explore the spiritual aspects of life, read all the books, and learned at the feet of various religious leaders, but they always left him unsatisfied.

And then he became fascinated by the idea of will.

He ran on further. He'd already exceeded his limits and the hill ahead loomed vast and smooth and calm before his eyes. Yes, the will had been an essential concept to him. Each footfall was like the ticking of a clock. Yet the movement of the clock of his years he saw not as time slipping away but time being added to. Even this, even the loss of his legs and part of his lung had not ended his striving.

How often he'd said to Jagira that one day he'd be back even if he was just a head in a jar, that he'd never let himself be defeated. Never again.

Far away the city loomed.

Once when he was forty, before the cancer, he'd been walking down a street around midnight. He'd spent the evening with some friends and walked home only to be stopped by a man with a knife.

He'd demanded money, this scraggly wizened man, his clothes ill-suited to the winter weather. And Clay Daniels had given him nothing; instead, he'd wrestled him, the small knife piercing his side as he drew the assailant up by the throat and casually snapped his neck.

Then he'd walked, careful not to run and increase his heart rate, (and therefore his blood loss,) to the hospital. It was the pivotal moment of his life.

From then on, he knew nothing would end him unless he wanted to be ended. And when the cancer came and the surgeries and the pain where another would have given up he staggered on, certain of his endless survival.

The hill was closer now.

He stopped. Now, fifty years old, his body restored, he sat

on the grass and thought.

He'd had strange thoughts of late. He'd imagined wars and fighting and the dead being taken up as pieces for the living and even imagined dreams the dead might have as easily as the living did, for they were in the minds of living men.

Later he'd write a story about it. He'd never written stories before cancer but the experiences had been such that with time on his hands and his hands the only tool, (that and his mind,) left, he'd become quite good at telling stories.

He thought about Jagira a moment. She'd stayed by him, (programming of course,) but still it was more loyalty than anyone else had ever shown. When his family had heard of the cancer there had been a murmur of rejoicing. Not that they ever said it but his sisters and brothers always resented the fact that he'd shared nothing of his wealth with them. And during the cancer, they had never come to visit him. Not once.

He stood up and ran right to the lip of the hill, and stopped. He had just enough time to notice the strange silver of the air, shimmering and vaguely invisible. He turned back, his home little more than a speck amid the sea of green, and the far city greeted him one last time upon the surface of his vision as he smiled and felt the blade pierce just behind his heart.

He was taken and paralyzed upon a slab and he saw one of them was injured, her, his, its body ruptured, snakelike limbs writhing, eyes screaming pain. He felt the scalpel slice his skin lengthwise down to his hip. His left side was being exposed.

And he had just enough presence of mind to smile grimly as he died. And had he lived he would have marvelled at the patient receiving his organs, the alien being there with others of its, his, her kind, clustered in the cold darkness of the ship as the alien spoke so eloquently in the language of its kind.

"Never give up one's life."

FIN

She thinks there is a man under the ocean. My daughter is convinced that deep down on the floor of the water is a man and she calls him Fin and says he looks just like me. I ask her how she knows and she just shrugs and says she knows.

My daughter has blond hair which tends to trail down in wisps and she usually wears a white dress. She is six and we live in a small house among many other houses. And when she is seven . . . her sister died at seven. They never found a cause of death. I think I will have to move when my new daughter dies.

She is playing outside on the grass and I am deciding how to do it this time. Poison? A slit across the throat? (Too obvious that.) Suffocation? Yes, suffocation will be fine. I had a wife but she left me and when she did, I vowed to make her suffer and so far, I have. I intend to make her suffer more and soon I will.

I am not an evil man. But no one will hurt me with impunity.

"Come in to get your lunch," I say to my daughter from the front step. She just smiles and says Fin says hello.

"Well hello Fin," I say.

"He isn't here now Daddy," she says, "but he is coming soon."

And so, we sit down and have lunch together.

That night I checked the calendar. Four months now. I should feel some nagging sense of guilt but her mother hurt me so I will hurt her back. She already knows I killed her daughter. The police are not convinced. I will be gone before they are.

Our house is small and I sleep upstairs in a nice quiet room. My daughter sleeps downstairs. What will I do with that room when it's empty?

On the day she mentioned Fin I thought it amusing, but that night struggling to sleep I felt myself grow strangely cold. I couldn't seem to breathe. The dark room seemed darker and then I heard a low plaintive wail.

Struggling to consciousness the room became the room again. That was my first introduction to Fin.

The next day my daughter mentioned that Fin had been over to play with her. She sat eating her cereal mentioning him as if he were real. I swallowed dry toast and wished her birthday was now. But I had promised myself she'd die when she was seven and I always kept my word.

She will die when she is seven.

As she went to school I went to work. The office however seemed oddly cold and when I looked at the windows as they reflected back the office floor, I felt my own eyes strangely foreign to myself. Like the eyes of a fish. Who was the man staring back at me? I kept working, avoiding the reflections as I could.

I contented myself with the thoughts of her death. Strange, I'd seen her born, watched her first steps, knew my name was her first word and yet I would end her as easily as if I brushed back a hair. Her mother should not have left me. No one leaves me. I will make her suffer for this.

"Hey," my boss came up to my desk then, "what are you working on?"

I stared blankly at him. I stared at his bald spot, at his suit which was always too tight, and didn't know why he asked. Then I realized I had my scissors out. I had been cutting something. Pictures of myself. Into the shapes of fish.

I made some excuses and then got back to real work. Glancing at the pictures I noticed I had also sometimes cut myself in half. And yet when I stared back again the pictures were gone.

So, what had I been doing then?

At home I listened to the radio, sitting in my chair as my daughter played outside.

I was sitting in my chair there at the far corner of the room, the radio pressed next to me, and I was imagining the following few months to come.

"Winning savage ain't winning, at no victory at all . . ."

My ears craned to hear those words again. I stared at the radio but the words seemed to have flown away. Had I even heard them? *Had I even turned the radio on?* I hadn't. I had sat down and it seemed music was playing but as I noticed I realized the radio was off. And yet I heard music and words.

But as I stood up and walked toward her out there playing in her white dress the words fled from me. All but that first line.

I decided to take a walk.

I had her with me hand in hand as we crossed the perfectly symmetrical streets, passing by house after house so like the others as conferences of trees huddled together between them and I imagined they discussed amongst themselves who would next fall to the strangers about them.

"Daddy, you're holding my hand too tight."

I loosened my grip a bit. We walked in silence.

The sun began to set.

Back home she prepared for bed and I sat alone watching night come on with those swift fingers of the dead. The room was white and bare, with my chair and the radio, (which was now finally silent,) and I prepared to sleep.

And then as night hit that window became a mirror and I was staring at myself. Suddenly outside seemed more like an ocean than a row of houses, suddenly noticed the hair of my reflection drifting upward from some unseen current and he was looking at me as I was looking at him.

And I rose from my chair, (as he did likewise,) and I confronted him. I mouthed the words, mutely screamed and he did likewise exactly as I did, save his floating hair. In disgust, I turned away and then heard that same plaintive wailing sound. Turning back my reflection was my own again. The other me had fled.

At work, I tried to forget all of this. I was not going mad after all. I had made a promise to kill my own child out of spite to make her mother suffer, so I assure you I was not mad. But what was happening to me?

At the breakroom the radio played.

"Winning savage ain't winning, ain't no victory at all . . ."

"Did you hear that?" I asked.

"Yeah," my colleague said, "I hate it when they raise taxes."

I ate in silence then.

That night I checked the window. It was normal. My bed was normal. My daughter slept though before she did, I asked her about Fin.

"Oh, he's so nice Daddy, he says he wants to make friends with you."

"With me, why?" I asked.

"Because you want to hurt me and he doesn't want you to. Goodnight Daddy." And then she went off to bed. So, her mother must have told her what to say. That was the only explanation. Even if her mother had no way to communicate with her, even if her mother was in another city it didn't matter. Maybe she used colouring books or toys or clouds but she had told my daughter what to say. She was behind it all.

At midnight I was still in my chair.

I was waiting for something I knew. I didn't know what. And then I felt it. I felt a strange pressure build as if my lungs would burst and I staggered upward and went to the front door. Opening it I plunged outside and suddenly I was standing in an ocean, yet I could breathe.

The house was behind me, houses ahead, but I was standing underwater and it was so dark. Octopi clustered round and I saw the underbodies of sharks, and he was there. Fin. Fin, I saw him too.

"Winning savage ain't winning, ain't no victory at all . . ."

Those words were uttered again. I heard them, and I saw as he walked past me, the man who seemed myself, and I watched as he reached for the front door, opened it, and then went inside. And I went to the window and stared at him sitting in my chair as my hair floated above me and then my hair floated away.

I stared down at my hands to realize they were dissolving into fins and my cheeks dissolving into gills as my legs broke from under me and also drifted away. My arms shortened and suddenly my face peeled forward and I seemed to be able to see in two directions at once. I became like some primordial creature, like a fish but older and then gazing up I saw Fin again.

Or rather Fin's true shape.

Some creatures in the deep water have lures. Some use their tongues pretending they are worms, while others have bright luminescent bulbs, pretending they are tiny aquatic creatures. And behind both are massive beasts waiting to draw their prey in.

Looming above me, I saw the great bloated shape of a primordial god as I flashed across the floor of the ocean trying to escape and he followed, leisurely, a thousand fingerlike bulbous fins cutting the water as a great maw opened slowly, slowly, and gazing forward I saw the houses drifting by, each one the same, each one identical, hoping against hope I'd find a way inside.

But I couldn't. I didn't have fingers anymore to let me in.

And all the time I imagined he sat in my chair, waiting for the sun to rise when he would greet my daughter and say, “How are you today?” And worse than this I knew he’d never bother to keep my promise anyway.

And the maw kept getting closer and I had no place to hide.

KNIGHTS OF THE SKY

Out above the dung-coloured trenches of the sky, the zeppelin came. One was aware of some black cancerous speck on the sky and then those standing in fields, on streets, those listening to conversations became strangely inaudible, like a waterfall drowning in the rhythm of itself, would all turn their eyes upward as the cancer came.

Imperceptibly it grew larger, sheer dimensions lengthened until there was no uncertainty. Then children were clustered indoors, cobbled stones rattling with sounds of runners and cries of a strangely muted terror. Because even though one could see it coming one couldn't be sure if it was coming to them. After all, there were so many cities, so many possibilities. The lumbering beast could just skim by, barely aware of them, perhaps drop a single incendiary fire, just to keep up appearances, and then move on to their real target, which hopefully wasn't them.

In a field, one needn't run.

With only one's company and the grass and a straggling caravan of trees frozen to the spot one need only watch as the black god passed overhead, unaware of them. Perhaps as such a man glanced upward, they might casually crush an ant under heel without comprehending that fate might fall to them.

And after the black god left came the subtle sigh, a hurried glance one to another, noting perspiration, terror, mingling of hope and dread, and then they'd get on with their lives again. For another day at least if they occupied a city. If in a field instead, one would simply wait out the night, rain, fog-encrusted ground, and mosquitos, just because at that moment until the next day their entire world might cease if they abandoned the spot. So, they stayed. They had little else to do.

In gardens where small metallic moths and butterflies

flittered carelessly, their diaphanous wings a glittering cacophony, eyes like brightly coloured glass, legs clicking absently as they walked across roses much the same as them, the old man waited for the end.

He sat and glanced about himself then struggled to the white curling body of the chair positioned on the grass. His home was some small cottage and behind it were rounded hills and before him latticed among the hedges which bordered his land with his neighbours he watched the flowering plants in his small world blister into bloom.

He noted each flower, some of which he had invented, small scatterings of red and yellow, a shade of purple blending seamlessly into black, a shade of black bleeding seemingly into azure. He glanced at himself or imagined he was doing so. His short hair was mired of mud which had caked and dried. He felt his beard, some stubble he hadn't bothered yet to shave off, and imagined how he seemed. A labourer, some errant gardener tending roses or retiring to a chair, spending his last idle years in quiet contemplation, that was the appearance given.

He spit into the grass and looked up again.

The zeppelin was coming. He felt it in his bones and he knew it was coming here. A small grey moth lit upon his gnarled hand and lifting it up watched the delicate machinery work. Small gears glugged along smooth tracks and with each carefully placed step an individual click clocklike was heard as the joints followed the logic of the mind behind them.

Seen from its point of view he was a massive giant, a looming lumbering behemoth and she was exploring a portion of him the way one might explore the peninsula of a continent, certain the dimensions revealed were not the totality of the thing, that if one crested that upswing of blind land and stopped upon the summit all would be shown, and known. He waited patiently as she climbed his wrist and finally, they were staring eye to eye.

Far above he imagined flyers coming. He could almost hear the biplanes, those fragile dragonflies that were skimming upward, ready to strafe the black god in their thundered march across the world above. The moth drew up her wings and flew from his hand and glancing up he saw the delicately winged insects prepare to burn the giant coming toward them.

The zeppelin had veered off course now. The biplanes had become an interesting target after all; buildings tended to stay put. He stood on shaking legs and stared at the specks of cancer assaulting or trying to assault the behemoth above.

Fire then. The zeppelins were impervious to fire but each incendiary round diverted the beast more. A pinprick from a wasp was still enough to distract a man and a hundred pinpricks could enrage a god.

He knew it would not last though. Already as the sunset cast amethyst over everything and the dragonflies burnt against the sky, each one cut as from a scythe, he knew it was only a matter of time.

Then with slowly unbelieving eyes, he realized one of the biplanes was coming close to him. He watched it swell outward, wings and body distorting the closer it came and he realized he had not even time enough to move.

With a crash the broken biplane like a children's toy slammed into his home. He was thrown forward against the grass and lifting himself upward saw the zeppelin turn away.

But why . . . ?

One of the biplanes had crashed into the undercarriage of the craft causing a crippling injury. The enemy was going home. They had nothing left to fight with and so pursued by more wasps the black god was forced to flee.

He turned to his ruined home and came forward. A badly wounded soldier was there. The old man drew him out as he sputtered in delirious derision. Laying the poor boy on the grass

the old man searched for injuries. Ah, there it was. Pulling open his shirt he noted where gears slipped and broke, where he was laid open like an animal ripe for vivisection. The pilot tried to speak but couldn't. The clockwork gears which governed his vocal cords were broken.

"It's alright," the old man said, "help is on the way."

The soldier pointed upward at the sky and the old man didn't know if he was trying to say he wanted to get back into the air or if he was going to a final sky now, fearful of his end.

A few small ants clustered about, small black metallic creatures seeking the warmth of the soldier's rapidly cooling almost-human flesh. The old man brushed them back away then took off his shirt, coiling it under the man's head as a pillow.

After a time, an ambulance arrived. With imploring eyes, the old man asked the fate of the pilot.

The stretcher was carried by two men, one of whom seemed to click with each step as the pilot was taken in a small white ambulance out into the main street. The old man watched as it passed on, still recalling hopefully what the stretcher-bearer said.

"He'll be alright. He's a hero after all. It's what people like him are for."

And onward he sped to be repaired and rebuilt and made ready for when the next black cancer came, while far across the channel in factory towns the endless sound of bodies being built was created, which never seemed to stop.

MEMBRANE

I could hear her heart beating sixty kilometers away. I sensed the pulsating quasar of her life flickering into view and passing out of view each second.

I couldn't imagine her any other way.

The valley echoed. I was struck by the sound of the grass pouring through the soil. I caught a glimpse of a worm seventy kilometers away and the almost palpable scream of the grass as it felt itself consumed.

Then I turned my perception closer to myself. All contracted then, the outlying clouds overhead muffled further than before. I caught an impression of electricity, the sparking thunder before it came but I pulled myself back before the sound deafened me. All now collapsed further and further as I first felt the rain.

It touched along my skin and the sound of it vibrated like a cord on a violin. Then more. I was being strummed upon, each thundering touch a note, each note unique, each note the same. The thunder and the drumming of the rain became the language of a litany of scorns dancing along my skin. I was reborn then.

I was truly Kzethriel then.

The rain passed. Uligheiruesg was ahead of me; I felt his three feet warp the ground ahead, each step like a stone thrown into the ocean of the earth. His name was untranslatable before but now I could see his name.

Each syllable danced along my skin in some perfect design; I did not even "see" his name as much as feel it when he spoke. I called back, echoing my name as I felt the sinews of his hair spin in all directions, exciting the air about him. Before I had seen him, but now I understood.

Before I had seen a grey barrellike torso, three arms emerging from this leading upward to a sightless head, twin mouths rowed of shark's teeth, and above this great black tentacles of hair which swam in the air, further amplifying their abilities to hear. Now of course I looked

exactly like he did.

I had not looked this way before.

The Kzethriel spoke again and along my skin I felt his words. He mentioned Ms. Nayer in the valley behind us. I recalled her pale skin, her dark eyes and hair, and the Kzethrial noted my impressions of her. He could feel the excitement in my thoughts of the woman then.

The rain passed. He spoke, indicating it was time now for the final test. He opened his senses utterly and I did the same.

The valley fled away. I felt the grass eating the soil and there she was suddenly, her heartbeat, her breath, her eyes, and the darkening skies. Then further; the valley beyond, the mountains, the echoing song of mountains piercing thunder, then further, lapping of an empty sea, each wave a marching army against an un-still shore.

Then further. Suddenly I had reached the other side of the world and just as suddenly I was coming back. I sped, further, faster, further until I could finally perceive myself. I heard my own heartbeat reflected against a continent come home. I heard my own breathing as it swam in the oceans of the air like a small crystalline fish. And he was next to me, observing approvingly.

He nodded then and the lesson ended.

"Well done," he said. I nodded likewise and I communicated with Sarneleisa.

"It's time to go home," I said.

Later, after retaking my normal form aboard the ship we were in orbit. The Kzethriel's ability to perceive the universe was astonishing but to truly negotiate with them we needed to understand how they understood their universe. The empty world below had provided the perfect test.

Ulligheiruesg strode before me and spoke of how impressed he was, then returned to his quarters. He had overextended himself. It was time to embrace silence a time.

Sarneleisa then came forward. I perceived the beating of her heart,

extending my senses outward further now.

"How was it?" she asked. I relayed to her my experiences.

"It sounds incredible."

It was, I said.

"Perhaps I should attempt such a change?" Across my consciousness flickered an image she perceived. She smiled then, sliding cool fingers along my skin and I felt each ambient signature of her heat. But now finally I could hear her heartbeat.

"I'll be back in a moment," she said and turned to leave, passing the central room into a nearby corridor. I was alone then, wondering if I should take another form, closer to her own.

How might I perceive her then?

The topaz-coloured obelisk of crystal felt the ambient heat of the room. It could have felt the walls, the ship, the ambient heat of the world below, but didn't. Sightlessly it perceived her passing along a corridor to her room. If it possessed hearing it would hear her, sighing its name.

Then it watched her as she slept and it followed her into sleep.

SOCIETY OF MASKS

Imagine a country. One does not know the name of it. One does not know its history nor does one know anything about it.

One can feel the walls, walk the ground, cross a street, sail on a river, or fly in the air. One can do all these things but one cannot know the name of the country nor does one know the name of the street or of the river or even of the sky.

All the people wear a veil, a singular piece of cloth which if removed only reveals another layer, and nothing more. This country is occupied by the colour red or blue or green, great billowing swathes of colour that curl and mingle together or come apart and the language they speak is no more understandable than the language of birds.

Now how would you cope in such a world?

Could you tell if the colour red barreling toward you was friend, enemy, lover, rival, stranger? A darker shade of blue or green brushes past your face and you cannot tell if they mean insult, compliment, a loving touch, or an icy foretaste of decay.

How would you know?

You could ask, but ask what? In what language would you use and even if they responded what response would you understand?

They have no hands, no faces, no fingertips, no eyes, no nose, no mouth. Everything you use to gauge emotion they lack and your every gesture, every plea, every cry elicits in them, what? Are they angry, hurt, sad? Can you possibly tell how a piece of cloth behaves or know when a piece of tapestry is angry at you? What expressions would you give to such a thing as this?

So let us say that eventually, one learns their language well enough to communicate. What does one say?

"You look lovely." "The sky is nice." "How was your

day?" You might describe your interests to them if you have any, or listen to theirs if they have any, but could you possibly tell if they are telling you the truth?

"I love you."

If a piece of cloth told you it loved you, what would you say to it? If you say, "I love you too," and it shudders as if in laughter have you been mocked? Has it agreed with you? Is it pleased or hurt you love it back or was it never in love, or did you just mishear the words it said?

How would you seek employment? Who would you go to?

"I am a hard worker and am good with my hands."

"We'll get back to you."

A brush of cloth stretched out in semblance of a hand and all this is the only response one gets. Would you believe them? Would you understand?

Ah, I have not described the country in enough detail yet.

The streets of the cities are broad and wide and the sun is always bright. The streets have no names, nor the houses, nor the cities themselves. The buildings rise blocklike, invisible to detail unless one stares or knows how to stare, in which case the buildings become detailed.

I mentioned the sun is bright in this land. Rather it is too bright so only sometimes does one remember night when the sun is low. At such times when it is cold one imagines it was always cold and when dark one imagines it was always dark. All becomes a permanent *Now* so one holds fast to the routine of clocks and measurements because it is the only stability left to anyone in this land.

Now, I said before that if one noticed detail they could observe more. This fact applies to everything not a person. If one walks the streets suddenly the cracks take on the dimensions of

great canyons, each line a long corridor, each darker stain of tar a continent.

One can peer into a book and note each line, each curving letter spread out in infinite dimensions until a single letter seems the entire world. The buildings, ah yes, the buildings. Moulding becomes the ornate architecture of curving seraphs or a doorknob becomes a canvas of silver populated by an endless splendour.

One can watch vehicles pass by and note each shading of a tire or glint of metal and suddenly it is not a vehicle but a collection of individual shapes and one can peer at each part of the whole and know them only individually.

If one is so focused the entire world collapses and peers down upon itself until you feel small and insignificant and terrified of everything. Because if a stone, a door, a crack, a wall, a book, a blade of grass can stretch into one's consciousness so far it distorts all else one fears they are going mad.

And all the time the bits of cloth move around wondering why one makes those odd, sad sounds.

And none of this, none of it addresses the noise.

The city is filled with sounds like a black tar poured upon everything, *deafening*. Each voice is a cacophony, an opera of squalor. Each horn is a blaring earthquake thunder. And at no time can one be prepared because they don't know when the next attack will come so they stay to their routine, hopeful in some illusory peace of mind.

Let us go back to the people then.

As I said they appear as colours and masks of cloth. Let us peel one away, not to a deeper shading of itself but let us provide a form to it now. Two arms, two legs, a face, (not yet unrevealed,) clothes as opposed to being cloth.

What does one make of such a thing as this?

One still cannot see their faces after all.

Oh, one can note they seem similar to oneself but still it is impossible to tell if they are happy, sad, angry, miserable, or bored. They are an enigma, beasts under glass observable and yet composed as if from a different planet.

So, let us reveal more.

A face. The form has a face now. But the face does not move. We have eyes, a mouth, and a nose, but the face cannot articulate anything.

Now let us finally provide our puppet with movement.

So, he, (or she,) shows happiness, sadness, grief, anger, or disgust. Except does this mean when she, (or he,) smiles, are they happy or angry? Tears, do they mean joy or grief? Teeth clenched, angry, or in pain? Even if one has the form, the face, the expression what does this matter if one does not know what such expressions mean?

And so, we come back to where we started; everyone wears masks eventually.

Because here's the thing; even if one knew the expressions intimately this would not help if all they did was lie, if a smile concealed a dagger, if a sigh hid a scream. In the end part of existence is spent trying to hide ourselves from others.

We call it being human.

We don't want everyone to know what we are feeling all the time.

But when you do not know the feelings of others the world becomes a greater mask, a great uncertainty, and the most galling part of all is realizing those who wear such masks assume the same of us.

We are supposed to be indecipherable mysteries after all while we cannot tell moment to moment what the sheets still think of us.

CLAY

He made the bet that I would lay myself within the clay and if I could survive the damp and cold then I would be paid. We were in the sunrooms of his home and the block dung-brown was there imprisoned in a glass cage and as he talked, he worked.

And gave me the mask to wear.

It was designed to let one breathe and as he worked, I lay upon the clay and felt myself sink into it with glass eyes staring upward as suddenly I drowned and was blind.

At the beginning, I could breathe.

In the darkness and the pressing weight, I imagined myself utterly alone while in the sunroom beyond the pair of them were there, my rival and my friend, to keep things fair.

Then I began to falter in my breathing and I realized the mask modeled on a gasmask from the war wasn't working. I reached with weighted fingers but realized I couldn't move at all and suddenly began to panic. Screaming silently.

The rest is just a dark blur but I recall the scent and feel of flesh, recall groping for the sun to dry my prison best, and then I am brought forth by my friend and see my rival in the far corner of the white room, suffused of sunlight.

And he is dead. And I hear the story afterward, which I cannot fully believe or understand.

Two men stood before the clay, one eager to be proven not a coward, the other eager to prove himself another way.

The bet was as so; the first man would enter into the clay of which he worked, his favoured medium, and remain for several minutes in the darkness while his rival watched to see the brave deed done.

And it never once occurred to the man risking death his rival might have other, less savoury intentions.

So, he entered wearing his ordinary clothes, little understanding of how hard it would be to move because when a man is young, he imagines what he controls with his hands he can control in every other way, and as the clay was pulled over him his rival smiled and waited for the man to die.

There were many reasons why but let's call it a woman because that is easy to understand and trying to distil ten years of resentment and hatred over another's artistic vision into a usable form is hard to do properly, so saying it is about a woman is shorter and convenient and cleaner in its way.

After a minute the man began to fail. The man's friend asked about how long he could remain and the rival lied and said he could stay a time in there but as they spoke something bizarre happened to the clay.

For at the moment of the man's drowning it rose, taking the likeness of his form, and curled over the glass-imprisoning wall, lumbering toward the rival, and before he could react the golem had thrown itself atop him as he silently screamed.

Then the clay dissolved away back into its glass prison, slithering serpentlike and the mask appeared along the surface of it, the man almost jutting from the block as if about to be birthed by his own creation, as his friend pulled him from the dark prison, saving him finally.

Then both went over to the rival who remained in the corner of the room, crying softly until he died, sounding like the drowning of the earth in summertime. And afterward, his skin softened and the colour of it was like the colour of the sculptor's clay.

Later an autopsy was done. There were no bones inside him anymore. They had all melted like snow in a summer storm.

As for the man he was paid, married in a month, and his finest piece created. It was the statue of his enemy, right down to the rival's bones within the clay.

ATELASI

He stepped on crimson sands, the brilliant sun above greeting him as an old friend. Behind lay the rocket, silver blistering in the warm gaze of the old friend.

And ahead of him? Death greeted him.

He had stumbled through space a lonely wanderer and now neath the half-shadow of the crippled wings of his ship, he had arrived in the deep desert of Mars and knew he was to die.

None had ever come here.

Many years ago, centuries perhaps, men and women had looked upward to find canals on Mars or jungle cities and obsidian jungles on Venus or somewhere upon the moons of Jupiter lush blue pale women sailing across wine-lakes, but such was not to be.

No canals greeted them when they turned their telescopes upward. No jungles but continents of melted lead.

And no wine-lakes nor women of pale blue.

Beyond Earth the rest of the system was empty.

And here upon an empty world, he was about to die.

Since no one lived here no one came. Since Mars was empty it was deemed to remain empty and why go to Venus to be burnt away like ashes in a maelstrom or Io or Europa or far and tiny Charon, nestled in the black?

He was to die along an empty track of an empty world.

He stepped onward and then fell and came face-to-face . . . with water? A small pool appeared, grown like a rough orchid from the crimson carcinogenic soil. It had expanded like some rough pool of mercury and through the haze of his domed helmet he barely recognized what he saw.

Water. Liquid water here.

He lifted himself up and as he did so suddenly the pool spread downward into the foot of the hills and upward into the

mountains, stranded in the terror of the thought that he was losing his mind he watched as suddenly the water turned a crystalline blue then bled onward in all directions like the trailing of a spider's web.

Canals.

He was amidst a delta of canals.

He put his silver hand to the water and realized he couldn't know if it was real or not considering his suit prevented him from feeling anything. And his eyes might not be seeing the truth since he was encased in the chrysalis of his armour.

Without thinking he put his hand to the dome of his uniform, unsnapped the thin thread holding it all together, and let his helmet crash brokenly to the cancer-ground.

Of course, he should be dead. But instead, he took a deep breath and found that it was good. The air was fresh.

And in the distance new visions he could see.

Crystals were growing in the distance and he realized they were cities. Great crystal-coral cities were blossoming in the distance beside the jagged mountains and he slumped to the ground gazing upward and saw a giant moth assail the sky. She was grey and spottled of black patches like burnt embers and she turned down utterly human eyes to see him and then went on her way.

As he lay upon the dark-red soil a woman walked past. She gazed down at him and he looked into utterly black-within-black eyes as her copper skin roiled and rippled in the heat-winds. She wore a tunic of silver, reached out an oddly insectlike hand to him, and he took it eagerly.

Then he was led onward along the banks of the river and as he did so a terrible, wonderful thought came to him.

For he imagined dim Venus beyond scattered of ziggurats and fiery Io peopled of living flames and Titan and Enceladus and Eris, even far Eris peopled of alien beings as if each world were

filled of life like individual rooms in a great mansion, each room invisible to another unless one crossed the threshold and stood in them. Perhaps each room lay in another universe or perhaps each room was merely invisible behind invisible walls.

The same might have been true of Earth he reasoned.

Perhaps if seen from somewhere else Earth seemed no more than a blackened stone or an ocean of fire or a sea of ice. Perhaps this was why none had ever ventured there from beyond for all imagined it dead.

He came to the edge of the crystal city and she asked in the midst of his thoughts his name. He told her and then explained he came from the shores of Earth.

She smiled and mentioned how odd that seemed for Earth was nothing more than a vast desert, unlivable and unlived. She marvelled anything could come out of the dead Earth.

It was exactly as he imagined it in his thoughts.

A giant moth sailed overhead.

And far beyond each of the other worlds waited patiently for life to come when the doors would be opened and they would see Venus scattered of ziggurats or Io and its women of flame or far Charon and the black-spiders whispering and singing their names if one did but one thing.

If only one stepped upon their shores first.

A giant moth sailed by and perhaps she saw him enter the crystal cities or perhaps she saw him lying upon the crimson sands of an ancient thirst.

HOUSE

I want to go back.

I want to go to the cool fires of the rockets. I want to feel the great heat and watch again the indigo blossoms of flame. When men first arrived here, they arrived in great ships to settle a frozen world and because winter held her country tight neath her fingertips they let the engines continue to boil and blister great swathes of the kingdoms they would rule.

But only so long as the fires kept burning.

I live in this house.

It is white and seems born and bled from the ground. I am in exile here, I and my family in exile at the edge of what was once the domain of man.

I wander the corridors and occasionally glance at the photographs and statues of my family, who loved me.

My father, tall and strong, my mother beautiful, my sister wise, and I their son, obedient in all things.

And they are gone and I remain and I would go toward the rocket summer but my feet seem held fast as stone. I cannot go beyond the walls of my home, for beyond is ice.

And I have been left behind.

Sometimes I dream.

In my dreams I imagine my family composed of wires beneath the blood, my mother scrambling along the walls with taloned hands, her eyes silver and bleeding golden blood.

I awaken, disturbed but can't forget these thoughts.

Sometimes they are the only memories of family I have left.

And my sister, cold and hard and cruel, in my dreams I imagine her screaming at me, calling me an abomination and hurling insults at me.

I do not like to remember her that way, not even in my dreams.

*There are others of course in their mansions and their rooms
scattered across the edges of winter.*

We talk, stumbling into conversations together.

Though some have gone quite mad.

But I remain as sane as the day I came.

*Some, when we talk, mention a name. En-Sarrya Sarra. It is
often scrawled on the walls of certain homes and when they turn their
eyes to it, they marvel and know not what it means.*

*And I have to explain to them again and again it is their names.
They scrawled their names upon the walls and then forgot even their
names as the cold beyond licked wickedly at their bones.*

*We must always remain inside, though some few managed to
touch the worlds outside.*

Or so they claim.

*One, claiming herself a telepath has even said she has heard a
new ship is coming to save us.*

Sometimes, desperately, I try to believe her.

But only sometimes.

*In my dreams sometimes, only sometimes, I stand upon a
malachite world. It is green mired of black and my sister is there calling
it a silly little world and I am happy and I am outside and I feel the hot
sun on my face and the cool winds trickle at my back and father and
mother are there, proud and laughing, and happy.*

And I am free.

And then I notice her eyes of silver as I start to scream . . .

I have seen them now.

*There is a ship coming. It is seen in the skies and it is coming
and there is grim whispering that it is either coming to save us or
destroy us.*

I glance at my family one last time, and I start to pray . . .

The men and women from the ship let cool heat blister the ground, itself once warm now cool.

The rockets had burnt out a long time ago.

They marched in slow steps upward toward the hill where the house lay. There had been many such houses but over time fewer and fewer had survived. Most had grown too cold to sustain themselves.

But a few had survived.

The leader came to the cubelike structure and opened the door. Encased in his silver skin he crossed the threshold as a voice caught his ear.

"Have you come to save us?" the voice asked.

"Yes," he said simply. "May I ask, what happened here?"

"The rockets cooled," the voice said. Instinctively the man went toward the source of the voice.

"How many are left?"

"Perhaps twenty of us, or less. How many are there of you?"

"More than twenty," the man said.

"That is good. That is good," the voice repeated, cool and like the sound of winter beyond.

The man moved across the corridors and noted the photographs, the small statues of three people and another. There was an elderly man, his brown hair greying subtly, and an older woman, her grey hair made into a bob, and a younger girl, her brown hair swaying, and beyond the other who had no hair at all.

"What happened?" the man asked again.

"The rockets cooled."

"Yes, but that would have taken a long time. Many years. Why didn't they leave before that happened?"

They. Not we.

"We would have been left behind."

"We wouldn't have abandoned you," the man said simply, as he came to the room in the centre of the house and opened the door. Inside the son lay, waiting like a bloated spider for its prey.

They came, they came to save us.

I imagined they never would but they came.

They asked us questions.

"Where are the others?" the man asked.

"They are with me always," I replied.

"Did you kill them?" he asked.

"No, of course not. I merely closed the door."

"And what happened then?"

"Nature abides."

With them, I notice the machine. She is the ship they sail upon. Her hands are soft and delicate and she reaches out and touches a star, sometimes she lets me and the others walk within the caverns of her thoughts and I know what it is to be free.

And sometimes she shows me the image of myself lying there on the ground.

She shows me myself and for brief glimpses I understand.

I am not in the rooms.

I am the rooms.

I stand within the flesh of which I am a part.

The corridors I have seen and walked down are but sinews and rooms are blood-chambers for the parasites to sleep within.

For what is man if not a parasite of sorts, to his machines?

And I remember my sister screaming my name, scratching at my skin, calling me an abomination and I desperately try to reach out and hold her, tell her I love her and I never want to let her go.

But I can't.

I don't have any hands and my body is merely the house I wander in.

*And all the time the winter moves on, closer and closer toward
me and I feel that terror clutch at me like a second skin.*

Like I were the man I pretended I had been.

And if I had the tears, I think they would be shed.

For my mother, my father and my sister. And myself.

But all I can do is let the people weep for them instead.

SURFACE TENSION

The last exiles of a dying Earth came seeking anywhere at all, arriving finally at an ocean suspended in the dark. At first, they feared to touch it only to find the waters were solid. One could drink, it was not ice but rather an infinite cool shade of sky pressed down against the cloud cover which never left. Yet the water could be walked upon as easily as if were earth.

The exiles having no other choice chose this to be their next new home. Little knowing they would never leave it or could ever seek another place . . .

Let us imagine time passed. I could select some future date but words such as “day” mean nothing when the world is in a state where no night is, where clouds make the world darker but never once bring upon the ocean an absolute, true night.

Cities have been built in time.

The buildings can never exceed a single storey. One cannot move higher than five feet off the “ground.” To go any higher is to invite death and so no one ever does.

The cities are built from the remnant of their ship and material taken below the ocean’s skin. Machines can descend and take dead and blackened coral or coral corpse-white and use this as the walls of a home. But no person can push below. And none will dare try.

Let me describe the people of this world.

They appear as you or I, they talk, converse, have sex, and always wear their masks. Some will wear the lusting face of a demon, others a face without a face, merely a blank wall of white with scarlet eyes.

Others will wear the golden face of a bird or the jewel-green eyes of an insect and all of this to ensure no mistakes are made.

Each mask is a statement made one to another.

Some will mean, "Leave me alone."

Others will mean, "Fuck me as hard as you wish."

Others will mean, "Kill me."

And they will go, men and women, and all the time they will be staring at the ground. Looking for them.

Attached to each person is a reflection. Where one steps the other will step in turn. But the reflections are not of the people themselves. Rather they are of their desires. A man steps forth to see a young woman he has known for years. He is polite, demure, and friendly. His reflection shows him raping her as violently as his mind will allow, indulging in every humiliation his mind can conceive.

She too has her desires, to be raped, to rape him, to skin him while still alive, to slice his genitals from his body and eat them.

And both will wish the other a pleasant day and go to work.

This is a simple routine of their lives and the lives of all of them.

How then to know when one wishes to have sex? How then to know when one wishes to release the pressure of a difficult time?

The masks of course.

Two people will find each other or rather find the same masks and this will constitute their contract. As the reflections act now, they are allowed to act even unto the death of one or the other.

Some believe these reflections do not reflect truth so much as goad humanity into their present acts, that what we see is not our desires but desires thrust upon us.

I disagree.

Had not our previous world succumbed to the desires of our hearts, burning to oblivion from the fires of war? We are not the bland faces of ourselves. We are our own reflections. Perhaps the sadists we see below came from the stars and we are nothing but their projections, impotently playing the games they set for us, imagining we are them when in truth we are simply their objects of desire.

Perhaps we are nothing but insects suspended upon the underside of the waters while they stand above us, imperiously never looking down.

Perhaps.

The only way to know of course is to touch them, reach as they reach for the water's skin but to do so would mean they would touch us and in that moment, some have feared seeing their own hands blister into the forms of their desires.

Or worse. Some imagine in that moment their own desires will touch and blister into the forms of them.

TULPA ICE-INSECTS

They were found in a thermal vent in an ocean, not of the Earth. They were found amid luminescent creatures sinuously moving through dark-bled waters, things one might almost have imagined could have evolved in Earth's oceans.

Perhaps somewhere they had.

The creatures were taken back to Earth to be explored and studied, like so many others. They were nothing really, merely microscopic creatures on six legs with bodies the colour of salt.

They were placed in a lab for observation and during the first few days nothing seemed unusual about them.

Except.

The longer one stared at them the more they seemed to change, growing longer, larger, bodies melting into another shape.

Eventually, it was realized these changes were desired in the observer and so became the property of the observed.

In their ocean realm, no creatures had sight. But we did and by observing them we changed them, altering them ever so slightly.

Until one day I stared down at the microscope to see they had created written words using their own forms.

They wished to speak to us.

And we listened.

They become what we desire to an extent. And the more we desire of them the more they in turn become.

Eventually one of us placed a creature upon his hand allowing it to burrow within and in the action of this they became as one. So, what he desired of himself he became, growing stronger, faster, smarter, kinder, one increment of change a day.

Then it fell to the rest of us.

She is inside me now and when I stare into the mirror, I see her there as well as I, beside me in fact. Barely human but

becoming more human all the time.

We had two thousand specimens like her and all of them are scattered now. Now, as a scientist how could I allow such a thing, except that they can become nothing more than we desire of them?

And even the worst perversities of man are not equalled to the potential we might have. A saint will not become a murderer simply because he is given the chance to be one.

By now they are scattered, growing and becoming and changing all things as well.

And all this took forty days.

Only at the end did we realize the ship still left upon their ocean world had not reported back.

A search was launched, some of the ice-insects themselves desiring to return.

We found the people, I among their number, on the ocean. Their bodies were riddled with insect wings and mandibles for teeth, and many had devoured each other.

We buried them and returned to Earth, and I was shaken to the core.

We had not changed the ice-insects at all you see. We, our desires had done nothing to them.

The Earth had shaped them, condensed our evolution upon them. So, their world shaped and shifted the forms of men and women, modelling them upon the ice-insects as well.

The planet's desire had burned something wicked into the hearts of them.

I stared at my hand on the way home imagining what we must look like to them and asked her what she desired.

She spoke not a word nor a thought.

She merely changed subtly the shape and size of my hand, and the number of my fingers . . .

THE PARASITE IN THE BODY OF GOD

Imagine at death all are placed and come together in the body of their creator. Imagine if at death all you are becomes but the cell of a god striding an empty universe for it exists at the end of life and yet is the child of life itself.

This ideal god exists first in the thought of each of us and whatever becomes the ideal of a person becomes their conception of god.

As such in this empty universe astride continents the colour of moonstone, god takes on whatever shape one imagines a god to be. It may be a man, a woman, a child, may be composed of five faces or faceless, may have five fingers or ten or none, but all life of each world is the product of it and so no one possible interpretation of god exists or could be true.

And into this is placed a parasite.

Some cancer drips into the body of god, and is perhaps one or more than one, perhaps the most hated enemy of god or the most fervent believer, for a worshipper of the divine would never imagine divinity belongs to itself but must always exist as the other.

This cancer then observes god, and communes with the body of the deity. It seeks in each cell some individual truth, hunts serpent-wise along the labyrinth of veins, conversing with the blood.

And eventually, it will find that which it seeks.

Eventually, it will find the heart of this perfect being and plunge the dagger of itself into its heart, ending it and becoming it as well.

The entire body will grow cancer-wise and be inundated with tumors, black decay, and all the multitude of the body will scream, cry out, all save god itself.

For god will but idiotically sit, contemplate the last day and the last sky, and allow itself to die for god is one thing above all.

Perhaps it is this one thing that creates the parasite, for it is lonely and god is loneliness. If it were otherwise no one would ever fear being alone; their own cells in their own bodies would suffice.

But to be the sum ideal of all flesh is to be solitary.

And afterward, the parasite will emerge, finding itself alone, realizing it is the new god with no worshippers nor anything to worship its own self by.

As this parasite exists here it exists too in the minds of all.

One would rather face oblivion than the world without you in it.

Each of us is god and none for the loss of one is the loss of each of us.

A god is not the power it has but the worship it inspires.

ACARI

In the ice they were found, small-bodied acari, and taken up they were studied and placed under glass.

The small gathering of men had come to explore the farthest northern world and had stumbled upon small colonies of the arachnids living in little tunnels in the ice.

All that day as the men worked, they had noticed Inuit crossing the ice far away but dismissed them as unimportant.

Then night came.

Night here would last many days. It was not yet the season when night would last what seemed forever nor were they high enough for night to dominate their lives. But the darkness still came and crept about them and as they did the bodies passing by grew closer and closer without them ever noticing why.

One of the scientists was in his tent, the small arachnid under his microscope. The creature had the colour of dried grey bronze tinged along its body and observing the underside of it noticed the eight legs writhing impotently in the air.

It seemed so pitiable and yet he needed to understand where it came from or how it survived the cold. His scalpel arched menacingly toward it . . .

There was a cry in the dark beyond. Stopping he stood. He was in a small tent separated from the others. Had the cry been one of them? He could not tell.

He went out to see the figure of a woman draped in fur. One of the natives of the place obviously.

Had she cried out? In a local dialect, he spoke to her but she did not answer. He walked to the nearby tent where the others were. She following.

He opened the tent to reveal the others dead. For a moment he held a vision of something he had once seen long ago. He had been in the jungle and had found a tribe who routinely

scarred their faces, marking them with a brutal arithmetic, each line some blunt tattoo to show their bravery.

Some of them had even worn masks of depraved things, masks designed with knives on the underside so that as one wore them, they cut new patterns into their waiting flesh.

Such a brutal arithmetic he saw written here.

They were dead, all of them, he alone remaining.

He turned to her, striding across to the other tent for the radio when a hand grabbed his arm.

He turned and in the dark saw in the distance . . .

He wasn't sure.

They were like mountains moving. No, not mountains for he counted eight thick legs. They were like the creature he was about to vivisect. Only they were as massive to him as he was massive to the creature under glass.

He turned then demanding she release him.

And saw her face.

Imagine the face of a cockroach or a spider equally as large as a man's, with dark bright eyes, eight or more of them arranged around a single cavernous maw and nothing more than this.

Nothing more.

He had no time to scream.

They had given the other men time enough for this but their mercy was at an end.

Afterward, she went into the tent and carefully picked it up, allowing it to burrow a hole into her arm and find her warmth again.

Then she left the tent leaving the dead behind, having no more interest in them now than one would have in vermin one had succeeded in killing.

And in the far distance, more creatures like her walked while their children nestled in the tunnels of their blood and in the ice below. Content.

THE HAND

There is a room without walls, though this is a mere illusion, and it is the lone dominion of a single solitary man.

One would imagine he a prisoner, but the room and its location were all chosen specifically by him. He, the lone occupant of his own universe chose all this, to safeguard humanity and his own sanity.

These are the reasons why.

He was an astronaut before. He and a crew of three others escaped the bounds of gravity and out in the void something brushed against all four of them. Only he survived.

He returned to Earth to find himself irrevocably changed.

The change manifested most strongly in his right hand.

His hand had become withered and the touch of it seemed like iron as if it were a metallic echo of a human limb now.

But the change though manifesting most strongly in his hand also manifested in his mind and revealed to him some terror. The end of things. Or rather, an end of human things.

The astronauts had brushed something in the dark between stars but this something was not something foreign to the Earth. Rather it was a sliver of a future point in time and the death of the other three occurred when their minds perceived this future unaided by the delusion of mankind.

For, the fourth man's life had been different from the other three. Born into a war and fire and flood he had watched all he loved perish, yet he endured. And as the cities arose again like the chrysalis-skin of the primordial he retained that odd insanity to imagine that all this would remain, that somehow this time the Earth would be set right and the death of his family merely an aberration of some unnatural thing, some broken aspect of humanity now absolved and gone, never to return.

The other three, having their families still with them held no such delusion and so perished.

When the hand and the mind to which the hand was attached began its slow transformation, he was rendered safe from the terror that had consumed the others.

This sliver of transformation contained over two centuries of a future history that cancer-wise was eating into his very bones.

It revealed that in another decade a human ship would depart and this departing colony would manage to escape the bounds of the solar system using a new form of propulsion which he was now revealing to scientists who would begin to build the very propulsion system of which he spoke.

Said colony would arrive, crashing like an ember soaked in gasoline upon a lifeless sphere and nothing else besides those things human would remain. No crops, nor cats, nor dogs, nor sheep, nor even artificial flesh left in case all other things failed them. Only themselves and their knowledge of flesh-mechanics.

And here lay the irony, that not all things human, are of humanity.

Three pounds. In each body, there are roughly three pounds of bacteria allowing one to consume and digest their food. Along the skin and in the mouth more bacteria, mostly harmless, existing in harmony with ourselves.

Follicle mites, stubby little creatures embedded in the forests of our eyelashes, translucent and so symbiotically bonded to us that they release no waste of any kind since such things would irritate the eyes, rendering them parasites which the host body would exterminate. And none of this addresses our diseases.

With no other food sources, the colonists began to work . . .

The astronaut in describing all this was not mocked.

It is the common cliché to imagine the raving man baying at the moon and all the scientists dismissing his every word as if

surely the universe were not so cruel as to grant a man insight into truth.

But the scientists listened carefully for they had seen war and death and blood and fire and knew the sounds of madness as intimately as an infant's cry, pierced and stilled in the wrecked womb of a ruined street.

They carefully listened as he kept on talking.

In the wastelands, the colonists had no choice but to graft and grow new gardens of flesh and bone and wear the skins of cloned people. They wore the skins of themselves.

The mites and parasites they allowed to grow and modified the bacteria, hastening evolution by billions of years to create new multicellular organisms, things neither mammal nor insect nor bird nor fish but composed of man and woman . . . imagine a human being suddenly allowed to evolve forward in time two billion years under a foreign sun, under the pressure of a foreign gravity, no longer bound by predator or disease, suddenly freed of any restriction the human mind might imagine.

The things made were of humanity, but never human.

All this the astronaut saw.

He saw also the music they would create, alien and discordant out of discordant minds. He saw predators devouring prey, always more mouths to feast upon what little was left, even those once of men, of women, devouring those things now and then, once of men, once of women. He saw language blister, certain words erased.

In two centuries, the deserts bloomed. The colonists had grafted the mites into titans creating a new ecology without plants of any kind. The mites diverged, some growing as large as whales, others no larger than rats, once only dwelling in the forests of eyelashes.

The colonists needed food so they cloned themselves and used the mites and the modified bacteria as mounts and

transports and pets. Or simply took one of their own cloned forms, divested it of most intelligence, and turned it into an animal instead, naked and crawling on all fours before the creatures so very like itself.

After a century nothing human remained outside the human form. After two centuries nothing human remained.

All this the astronaut saw. And so, the room was made.

The room is to be his dominion and to be his audience. It was constructed using the techniques the colonists employed. It is in truth not a room but a womb, structured from the partially augmented body of a whale and he will remain here, allowing the strands of memory to permeate it a day at a time.

For he saw himself there in that ship ten years in the future, and then upon the deserts and the wastelands, broken apart to a sad shattering of himself knowing he would die alone and all that was human would eventually die in him.

But now something alien had been thrown back as if the man of ten years to come were given some mad chance to make amends, so his younger self spends his time in this room and with the future memories of the desert and the sand lingers also something else.

The taste and scent of water.

They have encoded everything, not merely human but more than human, each blade of grass, each symphony, each novel, each noble lie. It is all carefully being placed here as is he and when the ship is made ready to depart a sliver of this wall-less room will be added to the ship, placed exactly at the safest point where nothing can neither pierce nor harm it so that when they arrive not only will that which is human survive.

They will carry out of their ship the grass and the songs and the histories and the epics and the whales and fish and ants and spiders so that which is human *will* survive. And only the

memory of that other time will wash over those survivors as if they were living two lives, one in which they were feasting upon the bodies of themselves and in another feasting upon the bodies of the beasts of the fields.

And the astronaut likewise will be in two places, knowing the dream of one life will linger in another. The only sign and token of this will exist in their dreams in the night, struggling in the dark, listening to the scratching of claws itching at the dunes and translucent bodies striding over their cities like ancient and primordial gods.

That will be the only sign and token of their once passing into being.

That and his withered hand.

LITTLE GIRL LOST

The dead can give witness to those who killed them. All you have to do is find them first and smooth away brief decays of mud or sand or clay.

Now most murderers have to spend as much time concealing the bodies as taking lives, stomping through forests or mires, finding sinkholes and quicksand, tossing their achievements into nothingness.

And the danger is always, as was the case here, leaving a little girl lost in the mud but her killer stuck as well, his head just above the line of vanishing, listening to her just below, describing how he killed her, her voice trailing lovingly into him as if forever, himself having no way to either silence her or end himself.

In such cases ravens are a blessing, cutting eyes and ears out of the living like driftwood is cut by ocean, talons softly perched upon scalps as if the whole world were reduced down to those skulls, like small islands in invisible seas of blackened sounds.

In such cases, murderers always remain relieved, even as they are sentenced to their cells, eyeless, silent, speechless, as if this is not death itself.

AS I LAY DYING

A man washes up upon a rocky shore.

He knows he has been here before but can't say where it is. He moves up the grey stones and realizes he feels something at the back of his throat. Some small itching. As he watches the top of the thick blunt spire he notices an inversion above like a secondary thick blunt spire in the sky.

Without quite knowing why he moves on and the higher he goes the closer comes the secondary spire toward the ground and he can't understand why he is moving toward it, and the itching becomes unbearable and then he realizes what he is standing upon.

It is his own tooth.

And as he closes his mouth in shock, after opening it in awe he watches the inversion of the ground he walks upon rise up and then crushes him without a sound.

And, as I lay dying, I imagined such a fate for myself, but it was not to be. My fate was less preferable to his own in every way.

EIRENGESIA

Above Eirengesia moons of rust hang overhead, Lorsaira red, blue Bithlya, and Chyalra green.

All life upon Eirengesia, from the smallest microbe to the largest leviathan is forged of metal and all the peoples here are grey as fog-stained glass moving about in cities like themselves, while oceans lash behind them as they pass.

And they gaze into the night to see rust-moons hanging like hungry blades above them so they pretend there is no sky, no night, no moons, nothing except themselves.

But one day ships like moths may come, mayflies amongst the peoples grey as fog-stained glass, and the people there in seeing them come will shut their eyes of steel and pretend they are not seeing what they have seen.

They will be like statues neither moving nor stirring when humanity moves among them, terrified of the scent of an iron blood. And humanity will climb back into the stars and only then they will live on again, statues freed to uncoil their limbs.

But all the while they still fearfully glance up to the lustful rust-moons where those ghosts have gone, and from now until eternity, they will feel rippling along their skins the softly whispering terror of a truth they cannot unknow, that there are worlds beyond, life as well, and days and miles they have not seen, nor ever will. But they will not walk amongst the stars.

For to do so they would need first walk upon the rust-moons resting in the night and in the heart of each they know if they do such a thing they'll die.

Or otherwise, yes otherwise, they are but cowards hiding in their cities and their towers, clinging to the lives they know even as all creation one day must go into shadow, and even their lonely Eirengesia is no more.

THE FIRE LOCUSTS

There is a world on fire whose oceans are set to burn where forests of translucent stems have risen into oblivion, screaming as they go.

There is a world consumed by fire which passes and leaves and in the wake of it and the shape of it, the fire locusts come.

I have seen them, great riddling bodies writhing in the flames cold like iron shells passing scarlet waters, swimming in the heat, breathing in the inferno as easily as a man might take a breath of air.

I have seen them and wept, for their fate and ours.

There are uncounted worlds; nearly all are empty. A man would go mad drifting along the route of stars. Those who leave the green comforts of Earth must travel together in packs for warmth, and heat, and company.

Sometimes machines are built to look exactly like those we loved and left behind or like our fondest desires. There are perverse ways between the stars where men and women will tailor unspeakable things to those of steel or circuitry, fantasies of godhood, death, or worse, all to satiate the innate boredom inherent in the dark.

For it was better to craft hell than oblivion as one wanders there, passing one empty planet or another, always seeking new life.

And now we have found it. It has found us in turn.

I was there when I realized the truth of it, the terror of it.

I stood upon a hill before a valley littered with transparent trees the colour of snow-glass and from the opposite side the fire locusts came and as I heard the screams of animals in the forest I watched ten-legged beasts scatter while those fire-makers came, and when they saw *me* they paused their tide of heat, stopped and

slowed, as if uncertain.

Then approached.

There was time for me to run but I could not as I watched the fire locusts work, felt the prickling heat, and saw in each of them something terribly human.

Their loneliness.

I was then pulled away by a man who had crafted a screaming woman he cut to pieces, only to put her back together again for another round of play.

And I was pulled by him to safety, I screaming as I went.

For I saw what the fire locusts do.

For them to utter a single word something has to burn.

Each breath of flame is a portion of their language and they speak constantly. When oceans melt like glass, they are in communion one with another. When a forest is consumed, they are calling one to another.

When the fire locusts turned I realized they were speaking to me words of love. They burnt a forest to the ground and killed a thousand beasts merely to introduce themselves because they were lonely.

And since no other life form can speak the way they do or survive their language the way they do they are forever trapped and ever alone. Nothing said by them to any other being can ever be understood or endured.

We left to go seeking other worlds if any others could be found, I listening to the cries of burning metal women and metal children and metal men, imagining we could have incinerated half their world to ashes in an afternoon.

But even if we had done this it would have been no more than an unfinished paragraph to them, a message without a conclusion, only partially understood.

So, we moved on again, left to ourselves singing in the dark with all our sins.

THE MIMICRY

I dream of them. I am standing on the moon in my dream then walk under the skin of the dead world and below are their cities, found in great caverns, those grey-bronze peoples of the moon, then walk into her dwelling and she is there, then my hands are about her throat, and I wake up.

It is always the same, the streets the same, the woman, the moon above me, and the skin of the moon, and I always wake up before she dies. I have never seen her face before and only see it in my dreams.

I know not why I kill her or try to. I know not why the streets that veer and spiral upward and below seem so familiar to me. I know not why the towers of white marble seem the same and there is never deviation in my dream. I only know I do.

I work at a bank in the city. I take the same route. I never deviate. I sit at my desk and work until 12:01 exactly, eat the same lunch, continue work, and at closing time walk home. I read, usually the same book, and I don't try to change anything.

I don't want things to change. I want things as they are and have always been. Sometimes I look to the women clustered about at the corner and imagine speaking to them but I don't have the money and I don't know what to say. So, I don't say anything.

My life is circumscribed. That's what Mr. Chur says. He is the only man I count as friend, though we rarely meet. He says I am living a dream life trying to hold onto something and if I keep my world the same then I can hold on longer.

I'm not sure I believe him.

I walk along the skin of the surface of the moon and look down into the caverns below and the world hangs in the distance and I do not envy those children of the world. I want to stop and

look over the cratered surface but my feet always take me down and there are the cities and I follow the trail to her and she is there staring at me so strangely halfway between anger and amusement and my hands are about her throat and in the last second, I realize she is trying to say something. But I never know what it is.

Until this night.

I go to bed, I sleep, do all things as before but now I hear her words clearly as she is about to die.

"I'm coming," she says.

I shake to wakefulness, terrified. I go to the corner where the women with their lips stained of cholera cluster and imagine my hands about one of their throats, can't, and then try to go to sleep again.

I work and as I work, moving wealth I'll never own, I look up and see her standing in the doorway, staring at me. She looks like any of the women of the city but I know her and she is coming toward me.

I stare open-mouthed and rise but it is not time for lunch and I have no way to simply leave. I have a schedule. I can't change it. She walks to me and the moment she enters where I work, she fades away.

I sit staggered.

This has never happened before.

Alexander Chur thinks this is a good sign. He seems to think this is the impetus I need. I have had the dream forever and now something new has happened. He does not think I'm mad but so many times when I speak to him other people stop and stare even when we're outside in the park.

It's as if my friend isn't there.

Or at least isn't there for them.

So, I crawl to bed and yet sleep won't come tonight. Suddenly I imagine myself only I am her and she is standing on the edge of the city walking toward me. She crosses the bridge, passes the streets of cobbled stones, passes the women I cannot turn my eyes away from and then she comes to my door.

It gives easily as if it was unlocked and she climbs the stairs. I see her footfalls through her eyes and see her open my door and I am confronted staring at myself lying sprawled upon the bed. And she straddles me and her fingers are about my throat and I am crying and screaming and then she is gone.

I sit up and go with a staggered motion to the window. The women are still there, clustered about. I turn to look at the moon and wonder if she is there now or if at this moment she has woken up and I am left imprisoned in her dream, my life like the stage left empty when all the performers of note are gone.

I go to my chair and take down the book I so often read, the book about the moon and the cities there, and for a moment I will try to remember what I have read and who I truly am but when the pages are closed and the book replaced, I will simply go back to sleep and never know our roles are now reversed. I will never know until I take down this book again. My dream has mimicked me and now I am what she imagines when she closes her eyes against me.

ATTICS

The house was not the world.

The room was not the house.

The door was not the exit.

They were not our friends.

But They were always below us.

I remember the time before when we owned the house. My father and mother would spend their evenings in a sitting room at the front and each afternoon my brother and I would spend our time quietly reading in the library, poring over volumes of the second religion or stories of dead knights who returned to the living lands in service of their kings, or lovers who spent their nights together, doing . . . I had then not the words to describe the things they did.

And then one night in autumn it happened.

I was nestled in my room watching toy soldiers sway to and fro in the breeze on my window sill and imagined the window led straightway to the moon or the tops of houses like pale mountains.

Then I slept.

When I woke, I was in our attic.

But it was not an attic anymore.

Father woke us and cried out that something had happened.

We were in the dusty rafters but our attic had never been this large. The darkness seemed to go on forever in all directions and yet when we walked toward the darkness I brushed into a wall.

Feeling about, sliding along the wall I found a hidden door and opening it came upon the roof.

But this was not our roof anymore.

It was broad and flat and Mother reached down to find soil upon it and the first few flowering plants.

And our neighbours were each on roofs of their own, all shocked to be here and not below.

Yet.

Yet none of us had even thought of going down the stairs. We knew where they were but Father and Mother and Brother and I hadn't said anything about this yet.

And worse we felt we couldn't. We just didn't know why.

Then Mother saw It.

Down on the streets by the front of our house was one of Them. A rounded mound of flesh opened the door and slid down the grey steps to the street and with It came others, one slightly smaller and two very small tumors roiling after larger things.

And across the street at Mrs. Davisham's house came a wizened monstrosity hued like the blackened corpse of a bird.

There were as many of Them as there were of Us.

Brother said he had to relieve himself.

Mother took him inside and then let out a cry.

We followed.

A toilet was growing from the floor and walls were growing about it. A sink was blooming like a rose beside the toilet and dark outlines of the attic were giving way and becoming our house again.

By the end of the day, the sitting room was back, the library and all the books newly grown. When I listen to the books, I hear them breathing and hear their heartbeats yet they look exactly like the books I used to know.

But the door to the down-below remains.

How do we leave?

The entire day as our house grew, we tried desperately to pretend it was just an ordinary day. Can you imagine that? Pretend the loss of everything was just an ordinary day?

By the next day, roads had grown from roof to roof.

There was a wooden labyrinth springing up between the houses. Each attic looked the same as before, small pointed little roofs, yet when you went inside, they were as large as the houses below. They snuck our house into these little spaces the way shells curl into themselves.

And there was now a garden before our new doors. Mother began to plant and tend the garden. She never had before, we hadn't a garden before. But now we did and now she did. And now she does, she always does.

Sometimes in her sleep.

Eventually, we found a road that sloped back to ground. They don't care about fields or grass themselves. They shelter themselves in the concrete and the stone and the buildings. We found we had an exodus. Some even left. Some didn't. We didn't.

We stayed in that part of the house that was still Ours.

And sometimes They even leave gifts, seeds usually, or pets or toys if they were not native to the house we owned.

I guess that They cannot grow what was never here before.

But we know we cannot leave through that other door again. Somewhere, and I do not know where, someone tried. There was a scream and there was worse. They were gone.

I do not even know where the story comes from or if They simply put that story in Us as warning of what They might do.

All I know is the city is not our own anymore. It belongs to Them. And all our days we spend talking about the weather, asking how our neighbours are, me wondering what the girl across the street is doing and hoping to see her from her roof after she's showered.

It has been twenty years since They came.

And now I can describe what lovers do to one another way in the middle of the night where no one else can hear them . . . sighing and moaning in the dark half unafraid.

THE TONGUES OF MEN, THE DAUGHTERS OF WOMEN

There is a country where everyone wears masks that appear either in the likeness of animals or people. One can walk down streets in the guise of birds with a curving taloned hook and beaks bright-glinting in the sun or appear an insect, green and emerald sparkling amid grass crystalline as itself, whole cacophonies of people portraying themselves thus.

Or one can appear in the guise of a man.

The last is most important though most guises have gone into shadow by the current age of things.

Once the world was filled with life. One needn't have worn a mask of some moth-feathered bird to have seen such flung upward to the sky. But gradually a wasting away occurred so by the current age to see such things one became such things or attempted half-brokenly the way.

One now pretends the nature of a taloned claw, clicking insect mouth, mantid's reach, caress of a dog, soft padding of a cat's paw. One becomes and attempts such things while others carry on until the mask a memory is and they become what they wish to be.

And some take on the likeness of a man.

They attempt rough masculine features, grope for the proper shape, explore and experiment with how these bodies were meant to work. They scour legends, examine medical journals, listen to how men were portrayed, all the subtle cliches they take to heart, and try to know. Were men powerful or brave or sickening cowards, or did they lord over women or accept women the same?

Was it to be a man by deeds or words or actions undone or honour or bravery or none, or no such thing?

In all the countries seemingly of sleep, those who come to try to know grope in shadows and pretend while others take certain assigned roles and sometimes even go into the gardens of bone and look upon the graves of all men everywhere and imagine what might have been, in an earlier, perhaps better age.

And some others take onto themselves the roles and likenesses of women and pretend of themselves the same.

A VOYAGE

Arialsul is a sphere devoted to one sea. All else is desert. The people cluster near the waters and do not leave. They cannot imagine leaving the edges of the water and when I came, explaining there are other worlds and other seas they thought me mad. They said there was only one ocean in all the world and I had simply escaped from some asylum but if I stayed forever I would understand there could be no second sea. I left them as I found them and went amongst the ocean of the stars to escape their company.

Ilseulia is a country of the dead. At night I listened to the dry canal beds of ancient seas and heard the ghosts rustling, making war one against another.

I watched wraith-pale forms crossing the impressions where the waters had once flowed, riding on the backs of great spiders, themselves forgetting they had died.

Of what they fought over I do not know.

In the morning the dead departed, going to where I do not know. I could not follow them to tell them they could not exist and if I had they would not have listened. They could not even have listened to each other, why else the war?

On Hlyarngalos are great seas of sand and the beasts dwell beneath them, sailing neath the dunes. The people there describe them as sand-whales and I ask if they worship them or if the beasts serve some purpose. But all they do is eat and die and the people there have no more regard for them than a maggot for a fly.

I mentioned my own beliefs and they seemed mildly amused. The people of Hlyarngalos, if they worship anything, it is their own hunger and their thirst. Killing their god is the only

purpose that they have.

On Yrisalos they believe that the stars are not pieces of light but the eyes of their deity. They believe they are always watched at night while during the day the sun, itself an eye, watches them with an unremitting sight. I've tried to show them that the sun is not watching, that it is but fire, but none believe me. Even if they could stare at each star in the sky, they would imagine they are being stared at. This is why they also always avert their eyes when looking at each other. They think their gods are watching them through each other's eyes.

On Tlusqulous they believe the birds were warriors once, each of them given a scarlet smear along their breasts which was the wounds inflicted on them when they warred one against another. I've tried to tell them birds were never men, nor are their feathers wounds but they don't believe me. All their mythologies claim that the birds of the air are like themselves and so they do not hunt the birds.

I can't decide if they are wise or if I am wrong.

Those who live on Yvalina do not believe there is a sky. They have no eyes so they imagine above them is the skin of some great animal whose tears are rain. When I came to them and told them of sight, they thought I was mad and when I allowed one of them to see, suddenly she realized the night sky above and all the infinite stars. She committed suicide not long after, wailing at the night. I left in shame and never turned my eyes to Yvalina again.

On Tsairclphyre are the January-Judas trees. If you sit under them and a leaf touches you then you will freeze to the spot like a statue and afterward, the branches will peer down and begin to consume you alive. The trees are worshipped by the

native peoples there and are often used to determine the guilt or innocence of others, believing that the trees only ever feed upon the guilty ones.

I wore armour so the leaves did not harm me.

Puzzled by this they let me go on my way.

Everything on Javamir is alive and each and every creature devours or is devoured. So, they all hide. Stones can be teeth and the ocean can be the body of a great leviathan. I tried to find people to talk to but couldn't. They were all in hiding, imagining me some predator come to kill them all, the proof of this was the fact that I came without weapons and appeared completely harmless to their eyes.

Everyone on Arithyis always dreams. There are only sleeping bodies there. None of them awake. You watch sleeping jaguars pursuing sleeping deer, both of them inches from the other in the waking, both of them racing against each other in their sleep.

There is no one awake to tell me how it can be this way, how there can be citadels or children if all the people are always asleep. I don't know how it can be this way.

There is no one to tell me and make everything aright.

I left as I came, unnoticed as a dream.

On I'qhairs I thought I saw my god but he escaped down a slender passageway between two buildings the colour of a corpse.

I asked the people there and they explained that deities are often seen by strangers who come into their dominion and I should rest and consider myself blessed. But I went on searching, seeking always, looking for my deity even if I could never ever rest.

Ydrisijalis is the only occupant of her own world.

I had reached the end of my journey and was about to turn back. The serpent woman there asked me if I had need of her garden and I replied no, I had no need.

I asked if she might come with me and she agreed.

We left the empty planet behind and I thought I saw my deity standing there but it was only the wind I am sure and all my beliefs they are secure, as are the beliefs of everyone who I have ever met, in passing there.

THE SKY WHALE IN DEAD LANDS

The sky whale sailed the upper air a time. Great flanks of bronze flesh touched sky, each eye a pool, two great seas each on the antipode of a world while a mournful cry shrieked once, grew silent, grew mournful once again.

Tarn-feathers stained the skies beside it. The falcons and their falconers had sloughed upward tracing hands and wings into the upper air till they brushed void, then fell, leaving their crumpled crippled bodies layering the fields below.

The sky whale turned its great seas of eyes downward, mourned a moment then no more, then the great fins of wings shifted as the mile-long carcass of its body drifted ever upward, passing beyond the barrier of one's breath.

And was gone.

Upon the grey moth world below, full of moth-feathers and greying slender fields like small rivulets of memory stalking in all directions, she walked. She strode-noted the carnage, blister-burnt bones, a taloned holocaust, and waited patiently as the dead returned to their mobility, even while remaining dead.

She brushed hair colour of dried corn and dead harvests, she bent and studied the small minute tremors of punctured punctuated skin and then glanced up as the sky whale passed by.

She marvelled it had come here. The leviathans tended to avoid Reulia considering how the tarns reacted to the great lumbering almost-god. But they had been preoccupied by thoughts of another death.

She straightened herself, the liege-queen genius loci of the plain-swept world, smoothed her grey garments which silvered in the night and gathered to her thoughts the harvest of these new wards of hers who had arrived, each so certain that in life their own failings had always been their own.

She sang to herself then an ancient hymn spun from a dead

world never reaching the farther shores of the sunflower empire which had existed forever. And before forever?

There was nothing before forever.

As she sang her ancient hymn the dead came to their senses again.

Passing the night tide, the sky whale turned lazily in the typhoid winter of the void, bowed his great head to his darker reflection, and moved on without barely a sound. Ahead Grandalym came to view.

It was a dung-coloured earth and yet, somehow, he could see within to the honeycombed chambers, endless divide of forking paths, lost lorn hopes of those lingering in the down-below and soon enough a few lost their ways or found them, guided by her.

She slid between the cracks of doors, the crawling shadow without form, and taking each by hand guided them to their own perfection then.

There is one lone child in the wilderness of doors crying for her mother and there comes the crawling shadow to take her fear away. Onward went the sky whale then.

Worlds spun by like pearls on threads. He collected them to his eyes and savoured each of them. Valafar, that world of spider-thread oceans and thorn-children where all stood upon the shore letting them be bound and stabbed, honour bound they felt deserving in all of this.

And with them came herself touched of thorns and blades, her body riddled with the whore-frost of her own destruction, but no matter what happened she came back to flesh again.

Then onward, Morax-Foraii, the world of the astronomers. Across the span of the river of Chaaryon the cities lay squatting

like toads in heat neath a summer sun, each one born from stone the colour of coral bent fingernails and all the time the sky whale lowered himself till he gazed upon the multitude which now gazed full upon him.

And she for a moment he could see and then she faded away, just a glimmer but a glimmer was enough, shadow of a hand, edge of a leg, splinter of an eye as the watchers waited expectantly for something, perhaps a star to die, yes, that would make the dead ones expectant in their nonexistent breaths.

Tarrying he fled away again, as the poets recited hymns with their billion words and the singers never ceased their singing, though they never spoke a word.

Of course, each dominion, from Sitri-Bitru and its lust to Sallos and its love, had been specially crafted to correspond to a virtue or a vice. One could create unending copies of themselves on Sitri-Bitru to experience any sensation of pleasure or dementia while on Sallos two became one forever, unable to break away.

And which was the sin and which the virtue?

The lady of rest or the lovers; whose was the prison, whose was the sanctuary?

Beleth and its monasteries or Barbatos and its forests of the suicides and the spirits of the trees and their violence; whose was hell? She delighted in the bloodshed and the death as bodies tore like spinnerets, as children were impaled and there, across the void, she spent her eternity preserving knowledge, all knowledge bound in living ink and living parchment.

And all the time the leviathan further walked.

Galgap assailed into the almost-god's eye, to see shoals of fish swimming in the turquoise salt-blue waters, each one formerly some other shape. But now their former lives even in death were dead.

Here they swam while in the peaks of Ascairyth they

wheeled and rolled, the land of the bird-feathered women mirroring exactly the change to something other than they'd been, the golden feathers of the crag-lands fluttering.

And as he passed the worlds they started to fade.

Lasa Veca Knaanic sat at her desk and for a moment gazed at the fields below. Her spire of the ancient tower loomed large as old memories though she could see ahead and so each second slipping fast and far and few coalesced like oil in her veins and all was the past, or the future. Or now.

Orobas at harvest time. Orobas in winter. Orobas when all was dust and the star an ember unborn and the Qwulne unbirthed and nothing was here, neither star nor starlight, neither dust nor dust-strewn ground, and this moment straddled both ends of time. Save at one end all was unbirth and at the other, all was the concluding curtain. Even death had died.

I will move my hand now, she thought, and it was so, but simultaneously her hand had gone somewhere else, not across the desk, not to the inkstand but to the window's ledge. She could see not only all that had happened or would or will but also all that might happen or could or could never be.

All this poured lengthwise down her skull like brandywine and so at this moment she had become multitude. Legion.

And not only her life could she see.

Her twin across the waters of the night straddled in his terror everything. Here on Orobas all could see the future and the past and change, if change they sought, while the stars supposedly guided all of Orias, even her sister fretfully gazing upward at the future shown, unshown to her in time.

"Something is happening," a voice said in her mind, and turning from the weakest among them Illyrian-Ardiaei appeared. The serpent-ribboned girl with her bright pale wings appeared

from the ether. Of course, Lasa had seen this.

“How fares your realm, my sister?”

“The malachite green hills of Ualac are aslant of thunder and the serpents in our breasts hunger to escape.” Idly the young girl scratched at the seam that ran lengthwise down her chest and occasionally the serpent within with its roiling malachite scales and yellow eyes would peer out a moment, then thrust back inside. Hers was a world where one’s aspect lay hidden in the alien flesh and should the serpent ever escape, with it would go the best of whatever they had been.

“Even your own?”

“We are all subjects to our natures. Have you noticed the girl Aariya yet?”

“I had. I will. I am seeing her now.”

“She is subject to her nature sister. She is trying to become what she thinks herself to be.”

Glancing backward Lasa caught the story.

Aariya had been murdered on a blade-bent wind, by herself. She had been the last of her kind in all existence and in her grief had ended herself upon a spire much like Lasa’s own, save it was rusted of centuries and the sun was a red tear in a black sky, a world of the dying sun, the last world to ever exist in living lands.

And then she died.

And she awoke to first find herself on Eligos there amid the steeds of Abigor and beside the black river, herself hollowed out among beasts of uncounted worlds, among all creations fixated to a point.

And whatever she was here, whatever perfect lightness dwelled within was not directed toward the impaler-flyers nor was it centered upon the lumbering-rumbles nor even upon the shepherd of the great menagerie; none knew even why she came.

Then she ran. From Eligos to Nebiros to the walls of

Aym-Haborym and from the walls to the crystal petals of Berith, where all become crystal statues there, lingering in their grief as she tends to her growing yellow garden.

And from there to Glasya-Labolas and the cities of the flesh where murderers remain to become grief-soaked garments or walls worn by unnatural things which are but the manifestations of their victims.

And all the time ahead of her went her shadow and across each world, she followed amid a menagerie of worlds. Her shadow escaped the cities of the flesh, she escaped the garden. Her shadow out-tricked the lord of Shaxishan, she escaped the all-consuming wealth of Haagenti. Yet all the time she was still running after herself.

And far behind of course the cannibal planets watched and dreamed that in the living lands, at least a hunger had been satisfied.

It was on Phenex-Zyarn that the pursuer turned and fought.

On the fields of fire Aaryia saw the mirror image of herself and as the dead gathered here all imagined they might return, somehow might cross over back to the living lands she battled her own reflection as if caught in a water's pool. And subdued her like a serpent in her breast.

Then a final stop and upon the fires of Tocharian Cinereous she watched and sighed, the great beard of flames, flesh but flames as well, cooling in her glances.

And she held pity for them both.

Aaryia took her other half to Bifrons.

The sky whale was approaching Bifrons now. It seemed so like Berith, yellow and gold and sapphire-stoned, and yet. A herd of creatures slithered on the ground, took to the air as tarn-birds, took the rivulets of water as fish, then turned into a field of

aquatic roses. And were still.

Once one came here, they changed not to a single shape but all shapes. A flicker of a thought was enough and suddenly all one's life they had been a bird, a stone, a blade of grass. Another idle fancy and they'd go off on another tangent, another way of being, always imagining this was the only way they were.

But imaginings can come almost to anything. Even stones in a dead land.

Her shadow was there, become-anything. The punishment was this, though some found it no punishment at all. Yet Aariya knew herself. Therefore, she knew the torture she was putting her own self through.

At once the shadow shifted like glass in water and become-anything became a man, some slow gradual process taking hold swiftly come, and then this man emerged, his entire history strung behind him like a rusted bayonet and the name of his new form caught wickedly in his throat.

And it was amusing watching from the shadows of the sky as the shadow first turned a shade of thunder, of fire, of steel. And then was done, become something else, and only the leviathan saw the form taken was taken in memory of a murdered loss.

And onward went the shy-whale on again.

Moth feathers slender in past tense round a point as Lasa reached for the glass, took it, and in memory handed the tribute to her sister.

"I've caught the story now," she said, "like amber frozen in a glass of ice."

"Even what is to come?" the serpent whispered through the girl's soft lips and nodding Lasa drank the tribute to the Final Dead.

And in the fields, the people saw what was to come, each bead of sweat, each drop of dew, and changing as they wished

decided another tack to follow, or track, or path, while on far Orias all sheltered in their terror seeing what was to come with no way to stop it then.

And the sky whale rolled on, approaching Orobas.

A magloire stone-child winnowed for a time upon the gem-bled garden and was still. In the air a callistus was at prayer, the shifting balloonlike body suspended upward between sky and ground, a sphere becoming the imitation of a cloud.

Amid the stone garden, the mandrake-demons wandered aimlessly while the world slowly receded from her grasp. Small tendrils radiated outward from the stem-body while slowly she felt herself harden into glass.

Others came then. Some like oil, green and slick, slug-flesh slowly robbed of flesh while fly-ambered eyes watched and slowly moonstone paled, opaquely drowning in their blindness as the moth-bled bodies felt themselves decay.

And in a moment then all were still, save the stone-child only whose flesh so effortlessly matched the prison-paradise of her home while the suspended supplicant also remained, high above the influence of everything.

And was alone.

Aaryia came then to the edge of the universe, to Isyrgul. For a time, she felt the winnowing silence take hold of her and then again decided she would astride the great door ruled by the Empty King and escape back into the living lands and what did it matter if the stars burnt out along the edges of the other side? She would at least be whole again.

Behind her lay Byrir-Ismere, paradise, the last abode of perfection for any who willed it, that serene centre of a lost creation and the slender-legged aristocracy of death. She came to the edge and behind the sky whale followed while behind the sky

whale the worlds were fading into memory.

All upon Dantalion wept where each became inside the thoughts of the other and all knew what was to come and all mourned her, there where the thoughts and minds flow together in the ocean of eternity.

The souls twisted on Dantalion and were still as Aariya arrived at Kimaris, touched foot to obsidian ground, stepped twice, and was gone. And then eased of their burdens those of Dantalion felt only a lasting peace at her absence in all things.

And it was done.

And all across existence tarried each of them, doing or achieving or not achieving anything, monuments to their understanding of heaven or hell, none of them knowing that the similar things they did could be construed as one or as the other, as a blue-bodied being and a soren manticore girl danced with blades between them till the dying of the dead sun and the coming of the night, neither knowing what they were fighting for as the legacy of forever was devoured to oblivion in time.

And even the monument of their actions faded and were done.

And as all these thoughts were turning in those watchful king-strode eyes the sky whale turned to the islands of his home and he had rest, as an ending took all things save Aaryia in the living lands, to find herself upon the last and final shore.

And night came afterward and of all things, there was no more.

THE QWULNE

Prologue.

There was a labyrinth by the shore.

There was a labyrinth of statues lining the shore with the salt-ocean beyond. She, that is the being walking now, occupied each stone form as well, and in their exodus, she watched each flicker of movement as they began to fade.

The statues were all of her, all of the woman in the other place. They were slender stone-forms like dung-brown earth or hardened bronze-clay and each reflected one moment of her life. They occupied each thought, sensation and emotion from the earliest conception to now as the aged woman cane-strolled toward the cathedral of the trees.

And she in her sea of flesh strode by with them, wandering amid the stone-walkers as they came into the cathedral. The trees here formed a great arch and grey hall and though the statues should have taken forever and the cathedral should have been on the world's other side, it seemed a few steps and all were gathered here.

And then she watched as each of them took position by the trees and slowly the stone softened to bark, the limbs uncoiled and uncurled to branches, faces smoothed and rotted into blank nothingness, and all her former days were consumed, added to the grey as a rainfall of leaves littered the ground.

And beyond the cathedral, the sea of trees beckoned.

In time each thought and sensation would fall subtly backward into the sea of trees to be more than consumed. To be forgotten. For it was impossible to notice each individual branch or leaf. It all fell together into a reflection of abject nothingness like the faces the dead once wore and if she tried to gaze at a single tree it would vanish, leaves glass-shattered and forms decayed to sand.

She turned from the dead and returned beside the salt-ocean to wait for new life to begin. And she waited and as she did her form changed accordingly, and soon she would occupy a new shape, new flesh . . . the moment was coming, the statue emerging from the sands, a head, arms, legs as it was pushed from the dust to become, and then . . . she felt something tearing at her soul. It was an odd strange terror and suddenly it felt as if obsidian fingers reached into the labyrinth of herself and tore the statue away.

And was gone.

And a howl went out and silence followed after.

I.

The dreadnought sailed the sky a time. The sky was rose-agate scarlet and the dreadnought seemed like a rounded grey egg flattened and bristling of a billion spines.

The spines were necessary.

In the distance Magdanus noticed the sky whale coming. He, (she, but that was a time ago,) stood on the balcony, his rooms behind him, and out coming fast the whale approached. On Old Earth, such creatures existed but they occupied the sea. No seas dwelled here though; any moisture was taken by the sky.

It thunder-marched close. He felt its heartbeat from a mile away, the slow pulsing rhythm like the still screams of a storm. It was a dull bronze behemoth littered with fins, two massive ones at the rounded base of its forefront and scattered behind others, thin like broken fingers or fingernails, translucent and transparent.

And each eye seemed a continent.

He braced his rough-hewn hands on the railing, his black coat hung tightly about him, terrified to move, and for a moment he imagined this extended to the clothes, the railing, the immobile wind which always died down in *its* wake as if it devoured the

very motion of the air, each current stilled in the presence of the hurricane's eye. All things in a heartbeat seemed utterly sentient now as if each inanimate thing were watching the god-thing approach.

Then he closed his eyes, breathing hard, stilling himself, steeling himself for this. And opening his eyes he stared into the continent of an alien world.

The massive structure of the dreadnought held a population of close to four million, Magdanus but a mite upon the back of the machine. And out there the entire city would have been nothing but a mite upon the back of the leviathan. All others, all other sentient beings had retired, their balconies sealed shut.

Only he remained to watch the god-thing pass. The spines were the only defence of the city, bristling poisoned burs that even the great maw of the whale could not safely consume without injury. Each one was thicker than a thousand men and hooked, barbed, and taloned. But though they could injure they could not fatally wound nor long harm the beast. He had seen the mouths of these creatures and knew even if it snapped jaws, even if it pierced itself in a thousand places moments later all wounds would ebb and be gone.

Only the memory would remain.

But the memory was enough.

It stared then at him. *At him*. A seemingly infinite mass, an ocean of life poured itself down the corridors of his eyes till there was nothing else, neither dreadnought nor sky nor air nor thought nor threat nor fear, nor love.

And he stared back at it. He stared into its continent of an eye which had seen images so vast and old, vaster and older than worlds and he added himself with them for it to remember him standing there, for his memory to be caught in its mind and preserved forever.

But nothing lasts forever.

This he knew but for a time pretended he didn't. The dark-haired man, his beard black-trimmed, his coat dark, his hands clenched tight and brown from the strain, in this moment he was all the behemoth saw and knew the behemoth saw him totally in its infinity of vision.

And then it moved again and if it recalled him or the dreadnought afterwards, he did not know. He could do nothing but pretend.

And would he remember the sky whale? Of course. But in a sky of thousands of such beasts could he tell one from another?

He did not know but hoped so.

Then he went inside again.

The planet was called Azairya. It was a great desert scarlet-stained with a blunt ochre which tainted the continents and even the salt-oceans clinging like dull oil to the land. One could walk in all directions and till they came upon the white flecks of the sea notice nothing except the crimson and the heat and the sun at its odd angle, itself scarlet as a wound.

Only a small landmass contained any vegetation of any kind, an island continent that possessed a few broken remnants of trees. And so instead all life had taken to the skies.

Most dwelled near this isle of trees, a corridor touching from the ground to the void above and about this corridor, the various races of Azairya dwelled. The riders, the fire-drakes and even the sky whales all congregated here from time to time but the sky whales never lingered long.

Instead, they would pass through, seek out prey occasionally but since the only prey was their own kind they would often stumble backward into the aerial desert beyond.

Beyond the corridor, Azairya belonged to them.

Magdanus turned back to his white curved chair and sat and stared at the bookshelf behind him and forgot he even was.

For a time, everything reverted to when he was a young girl on Delta and she was swimming in a river and even this felt erased partly as if she were swimming through nothing, or whatever it was that was taking little pieces of her with it . . . he came to and got up. He desperately had to move.

He went to the balcony again but by now the sky whale was gone. It had fled backward into the beyond, moving to prey upon others of its kind.

He turned from the oval-eyed window of his room to the counter by the far wall and fixed himself a drink. The smooth sensation of calm assailed him then, the green liquid dulling for a second his own terror.

Then he returned to the chair and the table carved from a single tooth of the beast or its ancestor and sat curled in a fetal position a few minutes more. The riders never did this, never actively stared at a leviathan. He understood now why. But he had to do this thing. Yet he didn't know why.

By now he'd completely forgotten.

A fire-drake passed by his window then and rising went out to see it as it passed. The serpentine body coiled through the skies, its eellike shape contrasting with the reptilian head. The fire-drakes sometimes let one ride them but one was just as likely to be devoured as ferried across the skies.

Great yellow eyes shone up and its coiled form stalled and retread the air till he was staring at it in mimicry of his battle with the leviathan.

But the fire-drakes were only thirty feet long at the most and though thicker than a man would not even equal the tooth of one of the younger lords from beyond. It stared at him a moment then abruptly fled back, speeding from him as fast as it could, grey dark-feathered scales rippling through the air as it flew.

It was frightened he realized. It knew he had been changed, touched by one of *them*.

He was about to go to sleep, knowing why the others had told him the danger of doing such a thing. He felt emptied as the bed slid upward from the ground and he fell backward as it became. It had taken a portion of him in passing.

And he must have taken into him a portion of it.

Down below in the gardens, they sat.

Carcalla McKrimmom and Jullanar sat in a garden in the city's heart and knew their child was gone. The rider, her vestigial wings aching and arching in grief slung behind her, violet as flowers of Old Earth, while McKrimmom sat staggered to his chair.

And with the child the other had likewise gone.

The other was a memory. The other was a keeper of memories.

Each being on Azairya had one. They were like a twin, an echo that passed from being to being. Sometimes a keeper would dwell with a single species or even a single family while others migrated from fire-drake to rider and back. Or to leviathan.

In the language of the places-in-between, between life and birth and death the keeper trod the landscape of something ancient and familiar. It was a world but was a world no more. It walked mirror-slanted with the living taking slender portions of its twin until at some point, far beyond when the sun of Azairya would be scarlet and cold, when the world would fade and the sky whales in their last grief howl the keeper would have the total remembrance of *All*.

Only then would they be at rest and allow themselves to burn with all creation. But at this moment both child and keeper had been taken.

It had been her mother's. Jullanar of the crane-thin hollow bones, of the yellow-vast eyes, almond-shaped and wide, she who had tamed the fire-drakes at El-Adoni-Haddai, had watched her

mother perish, fading and knowing that with her last breath, her mother's keeper went into her own child.

And Jullanar felt the keeper there, saw as keeper to keeper communed in the forest cathedral, the ancient salt-sea, saw the rows of statues all of her mother and saw the first glimpses of her own child.

All gone.

And she did not know where either had been taken to.

And McKrimmom, of Earth, the aviator, the wind-walker, the man who had come from the seas of water to the seas of sky, who had danced between the fire-drakes with his ancient dragonfly-silver ship only to linger in the company of the rider and become one with her. In all things. Even in this.

He could not see the forest of course but the keeper in his dreams would bleed impressions into the man, small fragments of a face, a form. He saw Jullanar's mother in his sleep unknowingly once or twice, the cool smile, the glance toward sunset, the withered and wearied bones slouching toward rest.

Now in their grief, they lingered together.

They had nowhere to go yet they knew they could not stay.

They booked passage far from Azairya and with them went Magdanus.

Something had poured itself into the man and he knew strange things, the slow rumblings of a god in night stumbling in the dark, the bludgeoning touch, knowing nothing could harm its flight.

Together they decided to explore. The universe was vast and Magdanus in his demon-haunted moments, McKrimmom and Jullanar in their griefs journeyed upon the *Giles Corey*, an ancient vessel meant to empty the lost and forgotten places and make them concrete as snow.

And so, they went. Parts unknown.

They passed many planets in their wanderings.
The Third Empire of the Douhrellia.
Zheixjael where it rained diamonds sideways.
Aoiria of the black waters and the red eyes.
The countries of the falcons of Zyaura.
The dead-lands of the lions of Kytherium.
But finally, they came to the land of the bird-feathered
women.
The world of Saardanyx.

II.

They were called the Qwulne.

They were composed of seven castes.

Artists and builders. Soldiers and makers. Some were sent to explore, some to defend and tend the young. Some crafted new machines, even those to skin oblivion and the void beyond as it brushed their atmosphere. Some with grey feathers or raven-fingered hands or wings soundless as a tomb. Some of flat faces or curved beaks, or rounded gemlike eyes. Into this world, the crew of the *Giles Corey* came.

There was a tower here.

In an empty wasted spot of ground, a half-broken tower lay, talon-fine. The Qwulne could not understand it but gave it name. It was called Aita.

So, the lovers in their grief stumbled to a new shore while Magdanus lingered by the tower Aita to study its remains.

And with them flitting from tree to perfume-scented tree was a child, golden-winged.

Her name was Cairey.

Cairey was born of Jamyroom and Iaeuilheus Xosh, born of

a raven and a tan-winged owl.

She herself was golden-feathered and an artist.

It was the way of things.

They had a house on the edge of a lake that smelled of a bitter wine that Jamyroon was reminded of. Though she didn't know why. Cairey ran from room to white room, Xosh trailing her, brown-grey feathers melting into oblivion when Xosh decided to hide from Cairey.

But no matter how well hidden Xosh was, Cairey on those stubby little legs of hers always ran and later flew to wherever Xosh was. It was as if she could see, even in the dark.

And whenever Jamyroon hid, her face hidden, her body suspended up upon a ledge out of sight, still the tiny voice would utter, "I know you're there, mother." But the voice seemed not always of her child.

And at night Jamyroon would sing the ancient song of rest.
"The body remembers, and the body forgets . . ."

Cairey was three when the strangers came. It was the age their daughter would be and the terrible symmetry clung to them as they struggled to hide their suffering.

The child was of fluttering turnings of gold in the green sun, the poison-seeming sun. Far beyond there was even hints of life beneath the surface skin of fire, circling forms just below the star, writhing, as if to escape.

And while the strangers settled to Saardanyx the *Giles* Corey wandered on. To investigate.

Blunt-faced grey women crept near to Magdanus as he worked. Their role was to tend the young, and defend. He nicknamed them abu markub in honour of an ancient race of creatures from the Old Earth. But as he journeyed deeper they all refused to go.

The tower was composed of a thousand rooms, or once was. Now it had crumbled to less than half of that.

He gathered himself and crossed half-lit rooms, noting ancient writing. And machinery.

The Qwulne, although spacefaring, did not seem advanced. They used no guns, had no machines to calculate or create. And though their houses were beautifully ornate they seemed somehow half-done.

And yet this tower spoke of older things.

There was a machine buried below.

He had but to reach it and to know how the Qwulne had created such a thing.

The *Giles Corey* had reached the edge of the sun. Long instruments brushed against fire and below green fire was movement and below movement was thought. Something struggled in the deep-below . . .

The child Cairey was an artist.

She worked in the sand-clay which shifted to the rhythm of a thought and the deeper the thought the more certain the image became.

In the galleries the artists lingered, in those great empty-shadowed places the artists delved and drew forth ideas made flesh in clay. And so McKrimmom and Jullanar watched as Cairey worked.

Jamyroon had come to watch as well whose triangular face, tapering to her chin gave an odd appearance, more than simply a bird, something more subtly alien.

Cairey sat upon the ground, the earth moulding itself before her as she worked and McKrimmom and Jullanar watched as terror slowly entered their hearts again . . .

In the deepest down-below he found the clue.

Embedded upon the walls was written the story. And with the story was her and the story was her and the story had been her.

There had been a race called the Qwulne. This he thought he knew, but it was not this race here. For they had built planets, created suns, had even engineered entire portions of the sky. And they had existed billions of years before.

And they created a race of beings to serve them.

A race of machines.

The machines had dwelled in a world of machines, silver cities stretching continent-wide. And in the Qwulne's final act they had placed themselves in their creation to live forever.

But nothing lasts forever.

Slowly the machines and their memories of the Qwulne died as eon piled to eon till only one was left. Aita.

And she in her desperation fled and attempted to create new life again.

She built a race of beings native to this sun the sphere revolved about but they could do nothing but destroy. And abandoning them realizing she could not create instead scoured existence to find new forms of life to use.

She pored over planets and at moments of her choosing took beings away to make them in likeness of her kind. But over eternity she forgot what they looked like, so seeing in the skies of many planets birds she imagined this is what the Qwulne must have looked like.

She turned her new daughter into birds in mock likeness of herself.

But at the end even she died. Yet her program lingered on, her last act to grasp others forth to Saardanyx.

To be born . . .

And Cairey revealed the sculpture of Jullanar's mother and taken aback, wheeling in their grief they watched as Jamyroon went to a small room and drew forth dozens of statues. All of the keeper's memories. Memories of the beloved . . .

And McKrimmom and Jullanar wept so loudly even the dead heard it.

The Qwulne were tested.

Some had been human, or rider, or oliqui, or aigandran or any of a number of races. Some known, some unknown. All now Qwulne.

The creatures buried in the green sun were freed and allowed to go sailing away, perhaps to whatever memory of the machine world remained. Aita feared they would destroy all things. But all things change.

Magdanus named them the brothers of leviathan.

McKrimmom and Jullanar sat amid trees of stone in a house by a lake reeking of a bitter perfume and watched as Cairey smiled at them.

And silent Xosh sat by Jullanar and raven-handed Jamyroon by McKrimmom.

Both had been told the truth, that each was human, that their families thought them dead decades before.

And they sat and made this request of the strangers in their midst.

"Tell us about ourselves," they said to them.

And McKrimmom and Jullanar did as Cairey by the lake made a sculpture of them all and a small little spider nestled upon the strange girl's back behind the small wings she wore. And a voice no louder than a spider's said the spider was an image of a keeper. It was a portrait of itself. And Cairey smiled and added something childish and young.

And the small spider smiled at that.

ZIBA'ANNA

The planet had no name. The stones had no boundary line or could be condensed to a few syllables. At first, the living things upon the shores of the planet lacked speech. At first.

The ship appeared then and in the hull of it, the humans came.

They came because they were afraid or unafraid.

They came because in some grim determination wished to take these small pools of water, these violet stones, and crush them under heel as proof of humanity's dominion.

They went because they were afraid or unafraid.

One was named Movita Tavernier, her dark hair rounded and framed a thin face and blue eyes terribly blue. And she descended from silver steps out upon the empty planet.

Her role was to explore and so she did, being the first human ever to stride upon the nameless planet. Behind her, none came.

She was the sum total of them, her eyes their eyes, her senses their senses now. Each aboard the silver spear thickened as a fortress and watched her stride the empty lands, themselves safely all inside.

First, she approached small jagged teeth of stone, her hands probing the razor-knife edges, her skin almost impervious. She glanced up, all eyes glancing up with her into the sun whose colour she could not describe for she had never seen such hues before, the hues of ziba'anna she finally decided, uncertain of where the word came from. Onward she walked, behind her the throng of them, certain and uncertain.

After an hour she saw it.

There in the pool of water, something stirred. It was no larger than a salamander circling the bright azure blue and she

gazed down at it.

It was similar to an insect with the elongated body of a cricket, no, longer, striding the underside of the water as if Movita were below it, and it above her.

Or this would be how the creature perceived things.

With her skin almost impervious she reached in plucking the creature out, gazing at it and its bright eyes. It had small mandibles, and curved daggers before its mouth and it swam on ten legs, all needle-thin.

It was no larger than her finger and she gazed at it as it suddenly stopped struggling and gazed directly at her.

And then, its back legs tore into the palm of her hand, she fell forward inches from the pool and discovered she couldn't move. Nor could any of the colonists in their corridors and sterile white rooms.

In a flash of movement, all human movement ceased.

Where am I?

The question lingered. Had Movita asked it?

If not her then who?

Where am I?

There was a palpable darkness to everything now.
Sensation of pain, bright pain like a flower blooming in a hand.

Then suddenly eyes were staring upward at everything.

Stones had grown massive in sleep, looming over all things now, pool of water an ocean she could not see the farther edge of.

Surrounded by trees, *no*, not trees.

Translucent stems grew everywhere and atop each an eye, a single bright blue eye, and suspended from it were bodies. In mind's eye they looked . . . could not tell.

Bodies flickered, gaining and losing limbs, gaining and losing eyes, mouths, black jewels of eyes turning blue, blue

turning black.

Watched bodies suspended making love, ripping at each other's flesh, tearing pieces off, thrusting one into another, tearing more pieces away, and then watching the act of giving birth, one or both of them, body ripped apart by hungry mouths, each suspended to the stem or infants crying suddenly, not suspended to anything but their mothers.

Scene changed then.

Man eating, becoming insect, becoming man. Sensation of food, meat corpse-dark and rotting, meat cooked and warm.

Sensation, imagery, word attached to the suspension of a thing.

Man. Suddenly seeing each man, each potential man, suddenly given a trillion shapes to choose, dark or light, thin or stout, and each the same word . . . *word*.

Suddenly the very concept erupts outward until shape and image conform to the boundary lines of a few syllables, even sound conforming backward to itself, even sound bordered succinctly by itself.

Then memory.

Using this alien script, these words, the story playing finally outward, backward, forward, time suddenly given meaning, meaning suddenly given to time.

In the cool waters, small pools of bacteria emerged. Each individual was part of a larger colony, capable of adapting themselves, becoming instruments, tools, weapons, a communal act of self-preservation, or a communal act of murder.

In time they stalked an insect drinking by the water and let out a thin web of a hand, drawing the beast in, subsuming it into themselves.

In the process suddenly the colony was gifted the perception of an insect, suddenly expanding themselves outward into the wider reality beyond.

They took on the shape and form of an insect and went crawling about the pool, slowly wandering into small forests of fungal growths easily mistaken for trees.

They devoured small pieces, gathering more into them and turning the small pieces of the forest into reflections of themselves.

This they did many times until some of the fungal growths gave "birth" to mirror images of the insects hanging from the tops of the stems while eyes began to grow atop them, as if the forests were suddenly capable of seeing.

Then long pauses in the pool, catching various small creatures, growing larger all the time.

Until now.

It expanded itself outward into her and from her into them.

She was a continent of thought, memory, flesh, and it went singing through her blood like a scar soaked in gasoline, waiting for the light.

She was a dark immensity and behind her and beyond her others equally dark, and it went passing through them, drawing them into the wake of itself.

And then stopped.

She rose upon shaking legs.

It rose upon shaking legs.

I have a mother, and a father, and a brother.

"I have a mother, and a father, and a brother."

She, it, she would have given all to see them again but wasn't sure it was the thoughts of herself or the other who was now somehow her.

No, not her.

Them.

A thousand possibilities flashed into her mind.

The creature could possess all aboard the ship, had done

so, and if allowed to leave would possess far more.

She imagined the bright city of her home and it wandering through the streets, touching each woman, child, and man as it went, allowing thin tendrils to pour through them, subsume them, consume them until nothing human was left.

But it was human now.

All she was it was.

All they were it was.

They were all afraid and unafraid, eager to conquer the dark corners of the night and terrified of all the things beyond which could challenge and undo them and terrify them into silence ever after.

"I speak," something said, someone said.

Something said.

It had drawn up the mass of the fungal growth about it using her as a latticework and it wove a new body for itself. Pale skin and a face, exactly her own Movita was greeted by, the only point of true similarity the eyes.

Though the hair was the colour of sea salt and this reflection was naked the eyes were the same metallic shade of blue. It had removed them from Movita's own leaving her own human eyes in their wake, reconstructing them as a final parting gift.

Movita paused and suddenly found the ground rise to meet her as she fell, suddenly braced by cool hands a shade of pale.

Then the other whispered in her ear.

She said she would carry on the exploration doing exactly what Movita would have done.

As Movita was laid upon the ground, she saw the colonists leaving the rocket in her mind's eye, each lying upon small growths of the fungal stems allowing each a mirror image to rise in their place.

And the last thing she saw before the end came was watching herself walk away, observing each jagged piece of stone from another angle of vision, another perception.

In time she would even forget dying.

Then she recalled where she had heard the name.

Ziba'anna was a scorpion deity worshipped by an antique race. It also meant the balancing of things. Gazing at herself walking away Movita lacked even the strength to call out her own name.

And when all had come together in mourning someone would remember the word, consider it, consider it again, and lay this as the foundation of their description of their home.

Then and only then the planet had a name.

THE SUNLESS PLANET

1) There is a sunless planet.

There is a world where the night is an unshifting pattern of itself, where the unseen clouds above curl in their serpentine-rhythms to hide beneath continents and islands of obsidian and black-salt seas. There is a country where the great unknown rivers reel forever, where the sky is an untouched but felt mystery, where the ground is never simply the ground but the great floor of some arcane secret, stretching on forever as above likewise seems forever. It is called Ardalna.

And it is inhabited.

Of course, the planet has a sun but the sun is too far away, so far as to seem like nothing but a slightly bright star. And between Ardalna and its sun is the shadow planet shielding all light away, the cancerous twin feeding on the sun beyond, however meagerly, while denying the same of its kin.

Yet the planet is warm, heated by fire from below which cannot be seen but felt, the skin touching the sure warmth like islands in frozen seas, the bodies slowly drawing themselves forever with unseen eyes, but the skin knowing the heat is there moves on, which later will become great gardens all of bone.

And each day fifty thousand people arrive from the shadow planet, descend en masse, a great exodus, while half return, ascend Icarus-like above, and half do not. And some survive a day or two or twelve out upon the great black continents, their last scream or sigh the last wine they will ever drink, before oblivion takes them then.

And sooner or later those who return will descend, followed by more and more until the whole of creation is emptied to a point, and the last word they utter will remain lingering upon the wind as oblivion will catch them then.

And afterward, we remnant princes and kings of the races

to come after mankind's extinction will emerge and gain our ascendance. And why would mankind seek an end of things?

Let me tell you why.

There were a billion terms for humanity. And though some were evil or cruel or at the very least unkind others were merciful or willing to help or eager to martyr themselves in the small games of their lives.

But most of humanity existed between and whatever it was to be human all possessed, all felt, all intrinsically understood. Humanity existed in this way as itself and in turn occupied endless places. They swarmed from off the Old Earth to find a thousand more and a thousand after that. They built cities out of glass which sung in the cool breezes of perfumed skies a shade of diamond and climbed the great forested peaks of living, slumbering leviathans. They crossed the oceans between galaxies as swiftly and easily as one might cross a river frozen into stone and in this, even in all this, they were not content.

There were worlds of water and fire of which humanity held dominion and ruled over sand-whales and sky-riders and serpent-clowns. They were the lords of the endless and in their power, they imagined they were as gods.

There was a war.

War followed after.

There are uncounted theories as to what happened. Some believe that in their godhood they imagined they could not be harmed by anything and to be proven true let loose war to see it impotently achieve nothing. Others suspect it was but their nature, that to be human was to hope in ruin. Others imagined some accident of fate felled them, something they never knew nor could understand but their nature had driven them to this course and could not now be stopped.

Whatever the cause the results were clear; the worlds of

water burned and the worlds of fire melted and the sand-whales bled and paled and fled away into the under-lands below, the sky-riders fell and the serpent-clowns danced a final time, their motley scales a kaleidoscope of a thousand colours, watching as creation seemed set upon fire and flood.

And mankind dreamed of glass and blood and the burning oceans and the melted candle-blunt worlds and the cities of glass were shattered and all mankind seemed to perish screaming in the roaring darkness without name.

There were a hundred villains and a hundred heroes, most of which only exist in the minds of us who follow who in their last moments must have imagined some great truth unfolded before their souls, and battles and runic weapons as of old and armour and plague and the screaming of children running toward the great maws of metal jaws. But in the end, and there was an end, they who lost in spite took something from humanity, ripping from all the human race some essence of itself.

And as they began to rebuild half a trillion souls discovered the curse now laid upon them. For whatever taken from them had emptied and hollowed them. And there was a time before when they were and there was a time now when they were not and neither cities of glass nor suns above nor the shore nor the embrace of one another nor violence nor the thought of hell nor even the thought of life could move them from the emptiness of themselves.

And now no longer human in thought they could kill without mercy or hope or die without fear or weep without the sadness truly clinging to their souls. And so, they went along their old routines trying to pass the emptiness along the road of time as if should enough years be gathered to them somehow some chrysalis in them might break and human they would be again.

And a century passed.

And then they discovered Ardalna.

There is upon Ardalna whatever was lost before, whatever missing piece in them replaced, rendering them whole and giving to them a new realm, some new thought once known then lost then found again.

But there is a price in all things and the price of Ardalna is this. Upon Ardalna they can never sleep. And so, for a day or two or twelve they linger awake upon the black stone continents drinking those thoughts unreached save here only.

But how long is a day in a sunless world?

A hundred hours as humans measure time. A hundred or two hundred or twelve hundred hours delusional and afraid watching all they fear or believe in climb from the stairways of the sands below into their skulls, fears and beliefs they never had until arriving here.

And all the time they dwell here, each ticking of a second in which they never sleep slowly they in their decadent decay fail, and women, with black-salt upon their lips, wail while men in silver and gold strip away their garments to lie naked in the company of the stones and the women and their greatest enemies, who are so often the same.

And when the last of them dies and the sand-whales bleed into the sands even their memories and the sky-riders fall and the dreams of them are done and the serpent-clowns dance a final time along the edges of a dying man's mind then we the remnant princes and kings of what will come after will come into the cities of humanity and claim them as our own.

And we will take of that word left lingering in their breasts and make of it a final epitaph for them. Can you hear it, can you hear the word out there left lingering on the wind? I can smell the last spark of the last man out in the black stone continent beyond, spark like electricity slowly ebbing into the scent of ash.

And I can hear him there crying out that word there upon

the stones staring upward into the unseen sky and as he dies, I imagine his eyes open and he sees whatever was last human in him blaze forth and smoulder as his spark is soldered into the ground to be carried far below while he will become but part of the great bone gardens left above. And only the word will remain. Only the word.

The word is love.

Nothing more need be explained.

2) There is a sunless planet.

There is a world unseen, unglimped save in lost mythologies where the sky is an absence of itself, shadows its skin and down below lingers ancient continents and islands, themselves of shadow, whole seasons of obsidian melted into glass.

And were one to wander there and tread the deep oases of the dim unsearched country they would stumble toward small rivulets and oceans of heat, unseen but felt, skin prickling awake at the thought of them as feet move on uncertain legs out over the pools of felt and unfelt fire. To become gardens all of bone.

There is a sun to the sunless world but it is so far away as to seem but a slightly bright star and between sun and world lies a shadow planet straddling between so that not even the merest hint of starlight breaks through.

And this world is inhabited.

Each day fifty thousand people descend to the world below from off the cold skin of the shadow planet and half return or perhaps slide onward to a greater void or wait or return only moments later as the universe perceives time.

And they who stay, those who do not ascend Icarus-like above they wander a day or two or twelve out upon the errand nothingness then fade as bones fade and bone-moths must fade.

The world is called Ardalna.

And in time, as creation dreams time all the myriad fragments of itself will empty to this point and be emptied of until nothing of humanity is left save cities of glass in deserts of rust to be occupied by us princes and kings of the remnants of life which will emerge after the last human perishes of itself.

And why would all life, all humanity impale herself thus? To become again.

There are a billion names for the human kind, fragments, and myths, and though some become cruel or unkind others martyr themselves upon the sad small games of their lives or eagerly give until blood runs empty of their veins.

But these are but the antipodes of all humanity, most of which lay somewhere between extremes.

Once, far back as we will measure time humanity strode across endless realms of water and fire and glass and blood and rust and drew to their dominion sand-whales and sky-riders and serpent-clowns. Once they seemed half as gods might seem. Once.

There was a war.

The countries of water burnt and the kingdoms of fire melted and the worlds of glass or blood or rust shattered without a sound and a hundred heroes were born and a hundred villains with them of which exist most likely in our mythologies of them, and nothing more.

And the sand-whales fled to the under-spaces below and the sky-riders fell and the serpent-clowns danced a final time in the halls of ancient unhuman kings and with their motley scales became a cascade of colour, lost forever afterward in the dreaming memories of stone.

Thus ended the war for them and a multitude of worlds.

And whoever lost in their spite took from humanity whatever piece made them as they were and afterward, the half a trillion survivors began to rebuild, knowing this piece was

missing, condemned to a slow routine.

They would rise in their crystal spires of translucent pillars and gaze across the errant deserts and feel neither heat nor fire nor fear even as some stepped off the towers and fell Icarus-like to be broken as broken wings to the sands below.

They would kill without fear or die without hope or feel the clinging sadness or know what sadness was. They were as wolves might seem to rabbits, predatory. Alien. And whatever words had lingered among the worlds of men were gone, whatever thoughts once theirs became theirs no longer.

And a century passed.

And then they discovered Ardalna.

They fall, a mass exodus of bodies like shattered glass strewn to the ground below, an arcane mystery, a floor stretching on forever unknowable and unknown meant to be filled with each falling piece of flesh until all the land is but the memory of them.

And the night sky is but the secret unshifting pattern of itself, unseen but felt, clouds of dusty obsidian, an eye unseen and unseeing and yet perceived as if even blind it feels the dragging forms crawling upon the decadent decaying ruin of itself. Of themselves. And blind as the sky they go marching off, a day at a time.

But tell me, how long is a day in a sunless world?

A hundred hours, as the humans measure time. A hundred hours spent sprawling the underlands, the ashlands, a hundred hours delirious and sighing their last sighs like the last dregs of wine. For so long as a man or woman is here, they cannot sleep.

Women will lie there upon the black dreaming of itself, blunt black continents by oceans of black salt, same salt strewn over their lips as they gaze upward with haunted demon looks and never turn away even as they become further remnants of the

gardens all of bones.

Men in silver and gold strip naked and go wandering, often to lie beside the women in their last gasps of heat as they succumb to old enemies or young delusions like glass staring through their souls, women and old enemies which are the same, drifting off all of them, to become as shadow.

He is out there now, the last of them. He is out beyond in the darklands waiting and I can hear the last man sighing in his frenzied state, and after the last man we will emerge, become, and go wandering in their cities, and in our dreams we will remember sand-whales and sky-riders and the serpent-clowns dancing with their motley coats of many colours. And we lay out as legacy those last words, can you hear them? Can you hear his last words after all others are spent, after the night and the rain and the countries of water and the kingdoms of fire are spent, can you hear him, laying upon stones, naked, waiting for an end?

All the old words are now returned to him and he is gazing upward at nothing, human finally and once forever, and never after again.

Can you hear him?

The word he is crying out, over and over again, is love.

Nothing more needs to be explained. Nothing else needs to be said.

TOM TRAM

Past Main Street, amid the throngs of various individuals, some shouting, some whispering, amid suits stained black or blue, amid the people who in a flash of motion seemed like singular beasts occupying a labyrinth smeared in all directions like tentacles of some primordial remnant of a lost ocean, past all this Tom walked.

The buildings peered down at him in the sweltering summer heat. He had worn his old tanned suit, the one meant to keep a man cool in summer and warm in winter, though it had never quite worked out that way.

He walked briskly, his thickset body, balding head, blunt fingers creating the impression walls moving while his spectacles were an oddly white glimpse past the sediment into the soul.

As if a soul resided within.

The door he paused before was to a nondescript grey building so ordinary everyone passed by it unaware. He entered glancing at the parlour stained a blackened nicotine grey and glanced up.

Ah, the stairs. He could have chosen a faster route but the curling ammonite-coiling staircase seemed an odd comfort and he hardly wished to get there faster than he should.

Then the long grey corridor, its carpet used by millions of men, (or so Ms. Van Dusen said,) the glass door and beyond it the office. It was an oddly comforting experience he realized as he sat at the chair, (*the* chair, not *a* chair, and one did not truly feel as if they sat *on* the chair but *at* it, as if it was too sacred to be used for what it was meant for,) and while he waited, he glanced at a table, noticed some magazines and started to read.

He was seated next to the glass door and across the small room was the desk, and at the desk was Ms. Van Dusen, the pert brown-haired woman typing. She had not glanced up at him, did

not bother to. She had seen him walk the street, noticed him coming up the stairs and right now, had she wished could have seen each small portion of the man.

But she did not wish to do so.

So, she kept typing.

"How long will it be before Mr. Carrados can see me?"

Tom asked.

"2.85 minutes, 0.29 seconds," Van Dusen said, without once looking at the bald man.

"Thank you," Tom replied and continued to read. The magazine was on the nature of psychic phenomena. Ghosts, aliens, demons, monsters. He grinned as he read a few of the articles detailing the latest actions of men who could walk through walls or women who could turn into smoke and fly away.

"Mr. Carrados has risen from his chair," Ms. Van Dusen is saying, "he is coming toward the doors now. Please stand up. By the time you've done so, he will have opened them."

Tom Tram stood then, stumbling a bit and just as he did so the black doors to his right opened and Carrados appeared in the room.

"Ah, Tom," Carrados said in his black waistcoat, his black locks draped over a surprisingly young face, went over and graciously shook the older man's hands then gestured with a slight jerk of the neck to go into the other room.

Which the older man did.

The room was similar but stranger than the office. The carpet shifted here. Rather than the tanned brown outside here the carpet became blue, green, and white, small threads of pattern mingling together. The walls were lined with black books, each book containing the full history of an agent. Their full story.

It did not denote merely such mundane details as birth and death. Nor something as trivial as description, (physical and psychological,) or resume of assignments attempted or carried out.

It denoted each physical act the agent had done by the nanosecond. Tom could have gone over, plucked a black book, (each one as large as an old family Bible,) and studied the eating habits of Larisa Tarent for sixty-five years, noting what she ate, when, how many times she had sex or how many times she wanted to.

The same was true for each agent.

The same was true for him.

"Mr. Tram, please have a seat." Carrados went over to the massive desk while Tram took the black chair before it and sat down. "This will be your exit interview, Mr. Tram, before you are fully retired from the agency. Do you have any questions regarding this?"

"No, none."

"Do you have any final statements, points of interest, points of protest, or any declarations you feel may add to your final exit interview?"

"No, not at this time, mmm, I suppose not at any time really from now on. Ah, no."

"Excellent." And so, the final interview began.

Tom was asked about his work as an agent. Of course, the records existed but this was about how Tom saw his actions over the last twenty-five years. He had been on 165 missions exactly. He had been tasked with infiltration, sabotage, and espionage, but never assassination. His profile indicated that had he been selected for such an operation there was an 87.5 percent chance he would go rogue, a sentiment deemed too costly to consider.

So, how had he enjoyed his time as a spy?

"So how have you enjoyed your time as a spy?"

"A funny word that, spy. It means to watch really, doesn't it? I suppose what I did I did for king and country more than anything. I guess I did enjoy feeling like what I did mattered. I

don't have a lot of regrets, but I have a few. Though I suppose all men have those as they grow older you know, slipping into night."

"Have you made plans for what you are going to do now your time with the agency is over?"

"Yes, I thought maybe I'd travel. I know this nice desert, beautiful place. Thought I'd see it, and some mountains. Thought I'd go for a walk along a mountainside. See the sights."

"Is there any final person you'd like to meet as regards the agency before you are formally dismissed and therefore unable to return to the agency again?"

"Now that you mention it," he said, staring over his spectacles as they shimmered in the sun, "there is."

"Ah, let me guess. Jabberwocky."

The rest of the interview was simply a question of various actions Tom Tram had performed. Did he feel he had properly completed all his assigned tasks? Did he feel he could have done better, and in what way? Etc.

Afterward, he took the elevator to the basement where Jabberwocky was held. His counterpoint. A being chosen specifically to kill him. His oldest friend.

The room was cold, dark and in the middle of it a tank of water almost twenty feet by twenty. Tom walked to it and out of the cool darkness emerged a man. The form crystallized into view, thin gaunt hair floating above him like tendrils of some predatory thing that on land might dissolve or rupture to a smear of grey.

"Hello Alistair," Tom said, "how are you holding up?"

"I can't complain."

Alistair Coralstone had been turned years earlier, providing intelligence to a rival nation. And as a special favour it had been decided he would also be an assassin, targeting one man. Tom Tram.

His only friend.

He had been given the proper weaponry and proper experience. The right terrain, (a dark alley, a moonless light, a blade made of ceramic that couldn't glint in the light, special contacts that allowed no reflection, even clothes specifically designed to reflect practically no light,) and lastly the right bait.

Himself.

In the struggle though he had neglected one thing. A lamp blazed overhead for a tenth of a second, flickering all things to view. And the fact that it had rained hours earlier.

"I've spoken to the staff, Alistair. They're taking good care of you. You get proper mental stimulation, always people to talk to, and games," a chess board flashed into view in the tank, a composition of light the failed assassin could grasp as easily as one might grasp a blade, "and you don't require food or drink."

"No, I dare say I don't. Tell me," Alistair took a long cool lonely stare at Tom, "can you ever forgive me?"

"Alistair, I forgave you years ago. The only reason I never said so was because the higher-ups thought it might undermine their attempts at interrogation. The truth is I was never angry at you, even on that night. Surprised yes, shocked, disappointed. Never angry."

Tom sat down on a chair specially provided for the occasion.

"I heard you've retired as of today," Alistair replied, changing the subject.

"Yes, well, had enough missions, enough chances to save the world. Foiled enough plots. Bedded enough beautiful women." Both smiled at the remark since in their line of work the world seldom needed saving, most of the women were either far too old or far too young for any amorous intentions, and most missions never really ended. The consequences of actions done were never fully done.

"Tell me, since you are leaving, can you . . .?"

"Bring you out?"

"Yeah. I talked it over with my jailors. They know it will probably kill me but, well they don't want to see me suffer anymore and at my age, a little clemency might be nice. I want to feel the hot sun on my face again old friend. I want to feel my heart beating in my chest."

"It might kill you."

"I'm already dead."

Tom went over to the door and chatted for a few minutes with the jailor of his friend. Yes, they had agreed for humane reasons it should be done. Why hadn't they mentioned this before?

"Your file said we didn't have to mention it. It knew what you were going to do. Even knew what I was going to say."

Tom turned back and put his hand on the glass. Alistair put his frail hand there.

And in a moment the two men were one.

Tom flowed through the reflection, shifting the endless patterns of light until he found Alistair. Then he began to pour the man back into flesh and blood. Piece by piece a form emerged to Tom's left; first the skeleton, then the nerves, the muscles rippling like red spindles of thread or raw broken pieces of meat, the skin, the eyes, and then . . . Alistair Coralstone was standing next to him.

He was dressed, weakened but still standing, and Tom himself led his friend outside.

The bustling street greeted the old traitor and he shook Tom's hand, sat on a street curb, and died.

And the men who had tended his friend picked him up and took his body back inside.

Tom Tram was looking down from the mountain to the valley below. It truly was beautiful and he had indeed earned his

final rest. He had wandered from a glacier onto the stone and was now seated, arms wrapped about his legs huddled together the way a small child might as he stared over the edge and thought about his day.

He had spent twenty-five years at his job. He had saved the world a hundred times. He had bedded beautiful women and regretted none of it. All this he tried to make-believe. But at the back of his mind, he knew Alistair was dead. At least he had seen the sun, had breathed and he had visited his friend's grave marker and was satisfied with this. No mention of his misdeeds had clung to the gravestone or him in death.

So, Tom Tram rose there atop Olympus Mons staring down across the endless Martian scarlet, breathed, (though in his current form, he had no need of lungs,) gazed upward at the night, and decided he would walk across the endless storms of Jupiter a time.

Just to clear his thoughts.

Just to clear his mind.